

Jeremy Burchardt suggests early allotment provision in Devon was poor with only 'eleven definite sites' prior to 1845.⁶ However, there is evidence for at least twenty-six sites for this period which suggests that it was not the allotments that were scarce, but that the evidence to prove their existence remains to be found.⁷

Partially as a response to the Swing riots against high rents and low wages, which began in Kent and quickly spread to other parts of the country, a branch of the Labourer's Friend Society was formed in 1834 to provide allotments at South Molton. Another, at Exeter St Thomas, provided loans to labourer's without funds, to purchase pigs and seed potatoes.⁸ Also in 1834 the Devon and Exeter Botanical and Horticultural Society encouraged the 'allotment system' among their members:

*The committee cannot too strongly recommend the adoption and extension of that system to those whose property enables them to give it a fair trial... to foster and confirm industrious habits in the labouring poor, by exciting a spirit of emulation, and the hope of reward, which is truly said to sweeten labour.*⁹

Although at least fourteen allotment sites were established in Devon in the decade following the disturbances, there has been no evidence found to suggest that these were as a direct result of the riots, especially as 'Devon was only marginally affected'.¹⁰ However, some of the major landowners who organised allotment schemes in Devon not only had large holdings in the county, but also land elsewhere and would have been well aware of the rioting and labourers' demands for access to land. These included Sir Thomas Dyke Acland of Killerton, The Duke of Bedford at Tavistock; Lord Fortescue at Castle Hill who was affected by a wages strike during the riots; and the Courtenays of Powderham who would have known about the troubles locally at Abbotskerswell, Newton Abbot, Cockington and Highweek in December 1830.¹¹

Rioting was not confined to the 1830s in Devon. Although food shortages and high prices seem to have been the major triggers, the decline of the woollen industry and in the second half of the 1840s, the potato blight, which affected many labourers who relied upon the potato crop to feed their families, were also factors. Poor harvests and insufficient imports, exacerbated by the potato shortage, caused food prices to rise dramatically. Rioting broke out in May 1847 in Torquay and quickly spread to Dawlish, Exeter, Crediton, Tiverton, Okehampton and Honiton.¹² Again, one of the responses to the rioting was provision of allotments.¹³

The town of Buckfastleigh had been hard hit with the collapse of the woollen industry. Shops were closed 'and workmen obliged to apply to the parochial authorities for relief.'¹⁴ A group of woollen merchants joined together to let thirty acres of charity land in the form of allotments. 'Vegetables of all kinds in abundance and quantities' were grown and 'sold at low prices', providing work for the 'allottees', giving their families 'a plentiful supply of vegetables at a little outlay', and providing low cost produce for people of the town.¹⁵ At Bideford, the Mayor, clergymen and 'leading gentlemen' of the parish formed an 'Association for the encouragement of a system of allotments for labourers', but many early allotments such as those at Kenton, Powderham, Tavistock and South Molton were let by large land-owners.¹⁶

Rent

James Caird, in 1851, expressed concern that labourers often had to borrow an advance from their wages to pay allotment rents, which led to ill-feeling between master and workers. Rents for individual sites varied considerably and depended on

The 'Industrious Poor': Nineteenth Century Devon Allotment Gardeners

Clare Greener, Chairman of the Devon Gardens Trust

For the majority of nineteenth-century allotment gardeners, gardening was not a matter of choice, but of necessity to improve their quality of life. High prices of food brought into focus the problems of labourers attempting to survive on low wages, many without means to supplement their income. Much of the countryside had been enclosed to ensure rationalisation of land holdings or to aid improvement in agriculture, and many families, both those who had moved to towns to find work and those who remained in rural areas, were without access to land. Attitudes to the poor had changed; there was resentment, especially from rate-payers, at having to make provision for those unable, or in the eyes of critics, unwilling, to help themselves. People in need were considered to be somehow at fault, because they were poor. In Devon, from 1770 to 1851, rents had doubled from 8d (3¹/₂p) to 1s 5d (7p) a week, but wages had only increased by 34 per cent over the same period and it was estimated that by the middle of the century paupers constituted 10.6 per cent of the county's population.¹ Allotments could contribute greatly to the family budget. Advocates estimated produce was worth £10 a year, approximately 3s 10d (19p) per week.² With average wages of only seven to nine shillings (35p to 45p) a week this was a substantial increase.³

Strategies for helping the poor in rural areas had included the provision of potato plots, oddments of land difficult to cultivate with a plough, on which their labourers could grow potatoes. These proved popular with the workers, because they could be tended easily before or after a day's work. Popular too with farmers, they helped keep labourers loyal and ensured wages were kept at a low level, for example, J. Piggins, in farm service from 1823 to 1828, was paid £6.10s a year, a miserly income of only 2s 6d (12¹/₂p) a week, but with the addition of a potato plot 'to be Bargain gratis'.⁴ The value to a labourer is illustrated by the fact that John Spurway paid £3 a year for his potato plot of 1/2 acre, the same rent he paid for his cottage.⁵

who held and administered the land - parish charities, estate or church. The quality of the land, the cleanliness of the plot, and other local conditions also influenced rents. Allotments in the countryside were usually cheaper than in towns, for example plots in Alphington on the outskirts of Exeter cost twice as much as those in Kenton several miles away.¹⁷ Many rents, although required in advance, could be paid quarterly or half-yearly which eased the burden; also, an individual plot could be quite small, making the cost manageable. At Gatcombe, near Totnes, 1/8 acre plots were only one shilling apiece, and even this small charge was returned to the allotment holders at their annual supper.¹⁸

The usual rent was 4d to 6d per yard, pole or perch, therefore a 9 pole plot (just under 1/16 of an acre) would cost the tenant from 3s to 4s 6d per year. If a plot was taken over in poor condition, the new tenant was sometimes allowed one or more years 'rent free' until it was cleared and returned to good heart.¹⁹ Rents from allotment tenants, in almost all cases, were free of tithe, rates and taxes which were paid by the landlord. This was estimated by the Heavitree Charity Trustees to be 10d an acre.²⁰

A landowner did not lose money by letting land for allotment gardens. Caird estimates that agricultural land in Devon averaged thirty shillings an acre,²¹ but most allotment land fetched at least £2 per acre more and in some cases three or four times that amount. At Heavitree the trustees made £7 an acre 'which is a very remunerating Price'.²² They were after all, responsible for obtaining the maximum rent possible from the land to help those who were too poor to afford an allotment. A landlord's costs included the expense of rent collection and many also maintained hedges and paths, although a proportion of this was frequently shared among the tenants.²³

The annual rent dinner was a social occasion, not to be missed, as beef and ale were provided by the landlord. These events were also opportunities for education of allotment holders in the shape of lectures by local head gardeners on the importance of new ideas, manures and crops, together with a prize-giving ceremony for the best produce or tidiest allotment.²⁴

Crops

Devon allotment holders were initially reluctant to grow crops other than wheat and potatoes, which were part of the staple diet of a family and their animals. Axminster rules specified no corn,²⁵ which was unusual; most allotment agreements had no requirements for produce other than to specify that not more than half the plot should be put down to either grain or potatoes. The tenants of the Earl of Devon grew barley and potatoes on plots of half an acre, but he arranged for seeds and plants to be distributed to encourage them to grow a wider variety of vegetables.²⁶

There is evidence to suggest labourers produced, by spade labour alone, better crops than farmers. In 1840 the Exeter Flying Post, maintained allotment holders were producing barley at the rate of 16 bushels to the acre, wheat at 11 bushels, and 45 bags [135 bushels] of potatoes to the 1/2 acre. This compares well with figures that Burchardt quotes which averaged at 40 bushels of wheat and 361 bushels of potatoes per acre.²⁷ Alfred Austin reported that in 1842 the average yield of potatoes on allotments was 300 bushels per acre which he said was sufficient to provide three pounds of potatoes per day for each person in a family of eight.²⁸

Prizes awarded at allotment and cottage garden society shows demonstrate that a variety of vegetables were grown in some areas. These included carrots, peas, leeks and onions. Reports of the theft of beans and cabbages from allotments in Honiton and Exeter St Leonards respectively, suggest that these two

vegetables were also staples.²⁹ Flowers and fruit are rarely mentioned for Devon. This is in line with Burchardt's findings.³⁰ Fruit, such as plums, raspberries, strawberries, gooseberries and redcurrants, was more likely to be grown close to the house in a cottage garden. This was to ease harvesting and preservation and to prevent theft.

At Alphington, Axminster and Kenton livestock was banned. Pigs were allowed on some allotments, specifically at Exeter St Thomas, despite complaints about the smell. In other cases sufficient food was produced to feed a pig housed elsewhere, which would repay the investment of time and money with bacon and manure.³¹

Women Allotment Holders

It is often assumed that allotment gardening was considered men's work. However, from the beginning of allocation of allotments, women both rented and worked on them. At South Molton, Eliza Dodds took over two allotments when widowed, and at Tavistock and Milton Abbot, Elizabeth Durham, and Eliza Friese were among those who paid 6d a perch for plots leased from the Earl of Bedford.³² Women were also tenants at Powderham, Bradninch, Drewsteignton, and Kenton. Allotments rented in their name may have been held for and worked by their sons, but Sarah Brinning, a 'Retailer of Cider', held a plot at Kenton in her own right, although her husband also had an allotment in a different field, and Elizabeth Addicott, an agricultural labourers wife, held her half acre plot for twenty-two years.³³

Where a husband worked away from home, down a mine, or simply worked long hours, it would have made sense for women and children to work on allotments. A petition from the poor of Clyst St Lawrence 'drawn up by themselves' stated that having a field would 'be the means of getting work for our wives and children'.³⁴ Women certainly took part in, and won prizes at, flower and produce shows which indicates an active rather than a passive role in gardening. Mary Lock from Kenton won ten shillings for the 'best kept and cropped vegetable garden attached to a cottage' in 1867 at the Kenton and Powderham Allotment Society exhibition, and Mary Major and Ann Hall both won prizes for their vegetables at the Moretonhampstead Show in 1883.³⁵

Heavitree Charity Allotments

The setting up of allotments let by the trustees of the Heavitree Charity lands is well documented. Two small fields, Laphorne and Southfield, with a total acreage of two acres, three roods and 27 perches, had been previously let by tender to 'industrious poor people'. These included William Goodridge, a malster and corn factor, Francis Hooke, a gardener, and John Martin, a dairyman.³⁶ In 1852 the Trustees decided to widen their remit to include a larger number of parishioners. They divided the two fields into allotment plots in order 'to give the Industrious Poor of the Parish an opportunity of cultivating a piece of ground', but excluded any 'person receiving regular Parochial relief, or being an habitual drunkard, or convicted of any crime'.³⁷

Initially the fields were divided into quarter acre plots, sufficient for eleven tenants, more if someone took odd yards. However, at least eighteen men expressed an interest in having an allotment. Not all applicants were successful, but land was eventually allocated to each person from both fields (see Table 1 on the next page), which suggests one field contained better quality land than the other.

No	Tenant	Lapthorne Perches	Southfield Perches	Total ³⁸	Rent ³⁹ per anum
1	John Pinwell,	11	9	20	17s 6d
2	Thomas Veysey, Carpenter*	16 ¹ / ₂	13 ¹ / ₂	30	£1.06s 3d
3	Robert Yates, Ag Lab	22	18	40	£1.15s
4	James Percy, Farm Lab*	11	9	20	17s 6d
5	George Wheaten, Painter	22	18	40	£1.15s
6	John Shobbrooke, Smith*	15 ¹ / ₂	8 ¹ / ₂	24	£1.01s
7	Samuel Dennis, Mason*	16 ¹ / ₂	8 ¹ / ₂	25	£1.1s 10 ¹ / ₂ d
8	John Martin, Dairyman	22	18	40	£1.15s
9	Robert Bull, Gardener	11	9	20	17s 6d
10	William Lethbridge	22	18	40	£1.15s
11	James Bambury, Mason	22	18	40	£1.15s
12	Frederick Trend, Gardener	22	18	40	£1.15s

*Evicted in 1855.

Table 1: Land allocation in Heavitree to make up 12 allotments

Heavitree in the 1850s was a gardening parish, home to nurserymen and market gardeners, but it cannot be automatically assumed that it was normal for a gardener to have held an allotment plot. On the contrary, they were often excluded because of the commercial nature of their profession. Professional gardeners, who worked in private gardens, rarely had allotments either, although labouring gardeners did, including the Frieze family who worked in the gardens at Endsleigh, and James Parkhouse, William Hurley and William Pidgeon at Powderham.⁴⁰

Compared to agricultural labourers in more rural areas these 'industrious' individuals were deemed sufficiently wealthy to be able to afford the rent. However, at 10¹/₂d per perch, this was the highest paid in the county at this time. This led, eventually, to a number of evictions. Thomas Veysey, James Percy, John Shobbrooke and Samuel Dennis were all given notice to quit in September 1855 and their 'goods and chattels in and upon all those allotments or Pieces of Ground being severally Parts of certain Fields called Southfield and Lapthorne' were subject to distraint for arrears of rent. John Shobbrooke owed £1.9s 6d the equivalent of 18 months rent, Thomas Veysey a years rent, Samuel Dennis £1. 8s 6d and James Percy 16s 1¹/₂d.⁴³ The allotments of the evicted tenants were assigned to John Collins, Robert Coombes, a mason, John Lethbridge and William Canniford, a labourer.⁴²

Northam should have been similar to Heavitree being approximately one and a half miles from Bideford, but it was in the poorer region of north Devon and was a large village with a population of 3520 as opposed to 3104 at Heavitree. The allotments there were set up in 1849 by the Reverend Isaac Henry Gossett. More than half of Northam's twenty-three tenants, were agricultural labourers, fifteen signed the agreement with a cross, two were shipwrights and only three were masons, whereas at Heavitree there were proportionally fewer agricultural labourers and more masons, plasterers and gardeners reflecting the proximity of a fast expanding city.⁴³

Tenants at Heavitree and Powderham and Kenton had 20 to 40 perches of land each. It is not known what size the plots were at Northam, but at 4¹/₂d per perch tenants paid less than half the rent per perch than those at Heavitree. Allotment holders at Powderham and Kenton (combined population 2631) paid even less, the maximum rent in those parishes being 4d per perch. Rents at Heavitree were paid quarterly, at Northam half-yearly and at Powderham and Kenton annually or half-yearly.⁴⁴

More than one hundred allotment holders have been identified at Powderham and Kenton for 1851. Almost half were agricultural labourers. There were fifteen masons and twelve carpenters. The remaining professions of shoemaker, thatcher, miller, railway labourer, basket maker, blacksmith, cabinet maker, cider retailer, coal dealer, cooper, wheelwright, saddler, inn-keeper and tailor, show a snapshot of a typical community which needed to be self-sufficient. Here too, some Powderham servants held allotment plots in similar fashion to agricultural labourers holding potato grounds.⁴⁵

Burchardt suggests that land let by local authorities was often cheaper than that let by other landlords, but in Devon evidence for this is not forthcoming. There seems to be no pattern related to landlord, but rather to urban or rural demand, or quality of land. Some allotment plots were never let such as those at Parracombe in North Devon because labourers complained the land in a quarry was too poor and the rent too expensive.⁴⁶ In Devon, there were allotments in the towns of Buckfastleigh, Tiverton, Crediton, Tavistock, South Molton and several sites within or close to Exeter. This reflects the problems of the decline of the woollen industry in the area. There were also several improving landlords such as the Fortescues and Russells who built cottages with substantial gardens in rural areas. These cottage gardens, together with potato patches meant that some rural labourers had no need of allotments.

Allotments were considered an incentive to keep people from applying for poor relief and withdrawal of plots could be used as a punishment. At Kenton, James Casley and James Snell lost their plots after 'being convicted before magistrates of theft in May 1861'.⁴⁷ Encouragement to remain independent of poor relief was demonstrated by prizes at allotment suppers and horticultural shows, which were given, not only for the neatest and best cultivated gardens, but also for not being a burden on the poor rates. For example, William Shilman was awarded three guineas by the Duchess of Bedford for bringing up five children without any parochial assistance and John Martin was given two guineas for raising four children without assistance.⁴⁸

In Devon, prior to 1870, allotments were aimed principally at labourers, journeymen and artisans to aid poor relief. Paupers, who would have benefited equally, could not afford allotments and were often rejected for needing parish relief. Allotment provision continued throughout the century, with no discernible increase in rent, which demonstrated that the poor were still in need, but there were other factors coming into play as well. Some families came to regard their plots almost as their own land. Plots were passed to widows, sons and grandsons. John Cowell held his allotment at Kenton for at least 38 years; it was then taken over by Henry Cowell. John Welch was a tenant for 25 years, Simon Rabjohns for eighteen years, before his plot was taken over by his widow.⁴⁹ The demand for allotments is proved by waiting lists and the immediate replacement of tenants who gave up their plots. Provision of allotments gave landowners an excuse to keep wages low, while appearing to help the poor, but tenants were complicit in this as they had emotional and practical reasons to stay close to land in which they had invested their capital of time, labour and money.

References

1. James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51*(1852) 2nd edn. (New York, 1967),
2. *Treuman's Exeter Flying Post (EFP)*, 12.11.1840, 3f.
3. Caird, *Agriculture*, 55; W. S. Gilbert, 'On the Sanitary State of the Counties of Devon & Cornwall' in *Local Reports on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of England* (London, 1842).
4. DRO 530M/E1.
5. DRO 4262A/PO 147.
6. Jeremy Burchardt, *The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873* (Suffolk, 2002), 36,56.
7. Newton Ferrers c1804; Filleigh c1819; Holsworthy 1821; West Anstey, 1829; Martinhoe, Molland and Tavistock 1832; Broadclyst 1833; Axminster, Shobrooke and South Molton 1834; Coombe Martin and Uffculme 1835; Clyst St Lawrence and Westleigh 1838; Bratton Fleming, Powderham and Plympton St Mary 1840, Blaxton and Kenton 1841, Walkhampton and Whitestone 1842, Bideford, Northam and Appledore 1844; Staverton and Tiverton 1845. These are the dates of the records found, not necessarily the establishment dates of each site. See for example, Okehampton, 1850, where land was being appropriated for building. Some parishes appear twice as they were set up at different dates. Source Parish and Estate records - see Bibliography.
8. EFP 23.01.1834, 2e; *Labourers' Friend Magazine* CIX (1840), 61.
9. EFP 23.01.1834, 3b.
10. See note 7 above. Hobsbawn and Rudé estimate there were only eighteen incidents in the county including four cases of arson, three threshing machines 'broken' and seven threatening letters received. E. J. Hobsbawn and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1970), 262.
11. Hobsbawn and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 130.
12. Geoff Doye, 'Throw out your bread, throw out your tommy': the Torquay Food Riots of 1847' unpublished paper (2004).
13. These included Buckfastleigh and Exeter St Thomas in 1846, Exeter Barnfield 1847, Gatcombe and West Alvington 1848, Northam and Okehampton 1850.
14. EFP 08.06.1848, 3d.
15. EFP 9.09.1847, 3e; EFP 8.06.1848, 3d.
16. EFP 25.01.1844, 3e; DRO Devon/Rental/Allotments; DRO L1258M/E/RL/GI; DRO 1262M/E20/156.
17. DRO 1508M Devon/Rentals/Allotment 1; DRO 2065M/E4/75.
18. EFP 13.01.1848, 3f.
19. DRO 1508M/LL1/23; DRO L1258M/E/RL/G1.
20. DRO 3004/PFA 277.
21. Caird, *Agriculture*, 480.
22. DRO 3004/PFA 277.
23. This was the case at Alphington, Heavitree, Kenton and Northam.
24. EFP 12.11.1840, 3f; Details from allotment rentals DRO 1508M Devon/Rentals/Allotment 1 and 1851 Census for Powderham and Kenton; EFP 16.12.1841. 3d.
25. DRO 49/26/11/25.
26. EFP 12.11.1840, 3f; EFP .
27. Burchardt, *Allotment Movement*, 158.
28. *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture* PP (1843) XII, Report by Alfred Austin on Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon and Somerset, 15.
29. See PWDRO 74/365/3 Kitley Cottage Garden Exhibition to which allotment holders at Brixton and Yealmpton were allowed to exhibit, also Exeter Flying Post (EFP) 09.08.1849; 25.07.1866.
30. Burchardt, *Allotment Movement*, 150-51.
31. EFP 08.09.1875.
32. DRO 1262M/E20/156; DRO L1258M/E/RL/G1.
33. DRO 1508M/Devon/Rentals/Allotment 1; At Crediton between 1886 and 1902, eight women rented allotments of varying sizes, seven of them being the original holders, including Mrs Ann Perkins who held her allotment for twelve years see DRO 2965M/E4/75.
34. EFP 05.09.1839, 2f.
35. EFP 27.11.1867, 7f; EFP 29.08.1883, 7e.
36. DRO 3004A and adds/PFT144, 275; DRO 3004A/PFA277; 1851 *British Census*, Heavitree Parish [CD].
37. DRO 3004A/PFA 278.
38. DRO 3004A/PFA 281.
39. DRO 3004A/PFA 282.
40. DRO L1258M/E/RL/G1-3; DRO 1508M Devon/Rentals/Allotment 1.
41. DRO 3004A/PFA 298-302, 306.
42. DRO 3004A/PFA 283-293.
43. NDRO 1843A/PW/124.
44. NDRO 1843A/PW124; DRO 1508M/LL1/23-26; DRO 1508M Devon/Rentals/Allotment 1; DRO 3004A/PFA 277-307.
45. DRO 1508M/Devon/Rentals/Allotment 1; 1851 Powderham and Kenton census returns.
46. NDRO 4075/16.
47. DRO 1508M/Devon/Rentals/Allotment 1.
48. DRO L1258M/V4/25.
49. DRO 1508M Devon/Rentals/Allotment 1.