

# The Story of the High Wych Allotment Site

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*We would like to ask your help. If you have tales to tell about your experience as an allotment holder or of your family's involvement, and would like to contribute to this project by writing up some of your own reflections on allotment holding, please email [lizwaugh@yahoo.com](mailto:lizwaugh@yahoo.com).*

*A joint project began early in the new year: the plan was to write a history of the allotments in Sawbridgeworth and High Wych which would result in the publication by the Sawbridgeworth Local History Society of a short book to be available at the Town Allotment Show in September 2020. Susi Smith, who had already written brief histories of the four Sawbridgeworth allotment grounds, would work with me and I would attempt to frame her work with the greater allotment history of the country and area. However, obviously these proposals have gone awry due to the pandemic and its effects.*

*Nevertheless I carried on with what research had already been done. Part of my work was to look at the High Wych allotments. I had the luck to have already talked with David Smith, who holds the portfolio for allotments at High Wych. He discussed the present circumstances and his role and let me have a thorough look at the meticulously kept old records for allotments the Parish Council holds. From those emerged the dramatic story of High Wych allotments and their preservation.*

The small village of High Wych had been part of Sawbridgeworth parish until 1862 when it became a separate ecclesiastical district. From 1901 High Wych has been administered by its own parish council, a fact that becomes very important in the story of the Allotments.

High Wych is a place, now as then, set in the midst of cultivated fields and bordering the great Rivers nursery business that was active during the whole of the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth. The agricultural labourers needed to farm these fields were drawn from the local population, as demonstrated by the fact that Rivers employees walked in to work when the great company bell was rung.

In this rural and prosperous area there has been only one allotment site ever established - two acres across the Hertford road from what had been Rivers land. This site has an interesting and, at a certain point, dramatic, history well documented in the many legal documents and clerks' files held by the High Wych Parish Council.

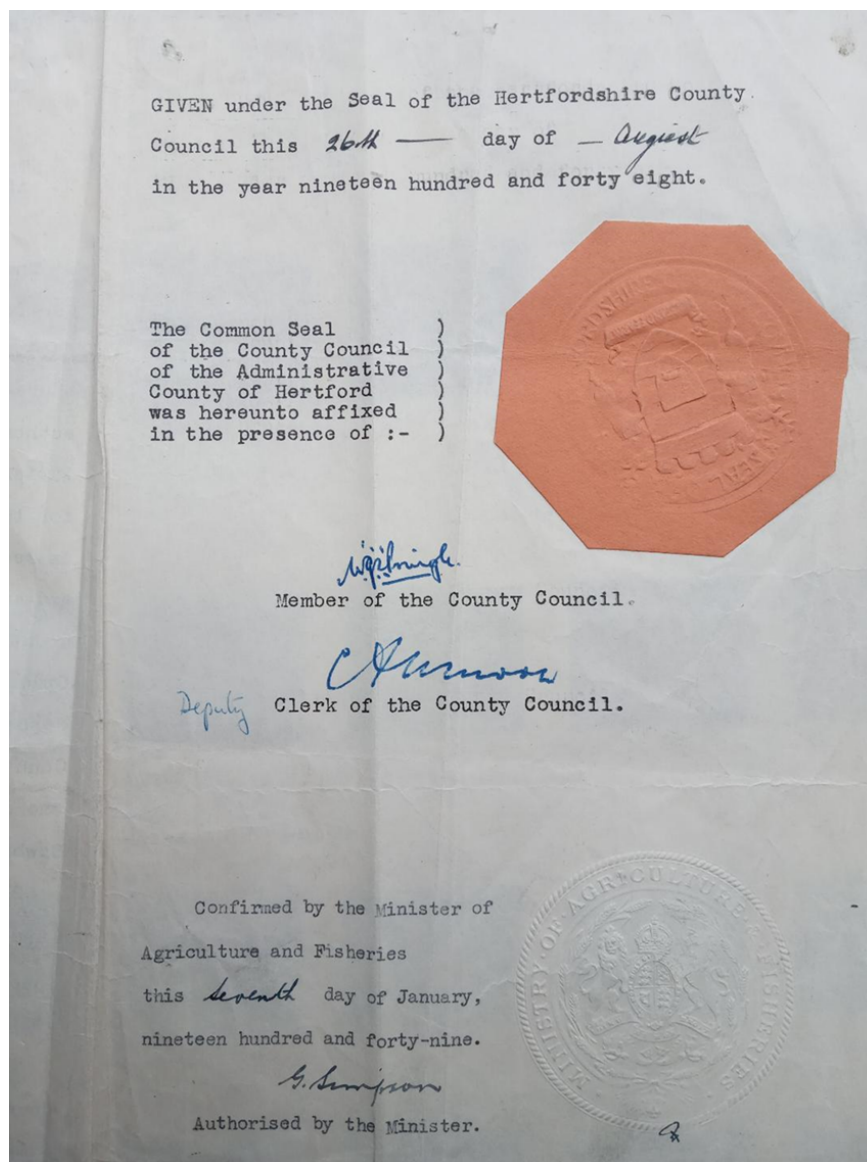
Its story begins with the documented lease of the top section of a field numbered 210 on the Ordnance Survey map. High Wych Parish Council leased this land in 1923 for a twenty year period from G N Charrington of Anchor Brewery for £4 a year. However, informal use of what must have been surplus land began in 1921 as recorded by a fine pen in the big red '*Register of Allotments*' that held allotment plots by number and holder's name. The size of each plot was the standard allotment size of 10 poles or 250 square metres, about the area of a doubles tennis court. There were 30 plots on the site and in 1921 each plot holder paid 5 shillings annually for his plot. This register (see below) was carefully kept and meticulously audited, clearly no clerk escaped scrutiny, for the two years records were made in it. Nearly all the plot holders lived in High Wych.

*Register of Allotments from 1921, showing holders' names and auditing stamps High Wych Parish Council*

Blow by blow, the battle was engaged as follows:

- 2

- The County solicitor began writing letters to the vendor's solicitor and years of correspondence and review began.
- By the 29 August 1949, the price was settled at £250, less than the vendor wanted but more than the original county offer.
- The county solicitor asked for a cheque from the Parish Council to complete the sale.
- The Parish Clerk responded that there were not enough funds available and asked for a loan from the County Council.
- The Parish Council was refused by the County Council and sent to the Public Works Loan Commission.
- On 13 February 1950 the sale was finally completed at a cost of £250 for the land, £50 for surveys and £100 for legal fees!



*Document confirming the purchase of the allotment site, High Wych Parish Council*



It was worth the time and effort it seems. During the years of dispute, the allotment holders continued peacefully to work their plots and so it continues today.

Why did the government agencies involved never back away from this lengthy struggle? The short answer is that there were people requesting plots – the demand had been steady from the beginning of the lease period – and they had rights guaranteed by legislation in several acts of parliament.

The original date of 1921 is also significant as in this post Great War period the shortages caused by conflict continued. The same would have been true post WWII. There had been a readjustment made necessary by the return of soldiers needing work and finding less traditional employment in agricultural industries such as the Rivers business. There was a shift in the kind of employment available caused by a number of factors such as a reduction in production of commercial products or increased mechanisation or competition with those such as women or older men who had carried out the work while the young agricultural labourers, prime soldier stock, were away. Soldiers who had seen a wider world were also less ready to accept the hard conditions and poor wages of agricultural labour and having cars were able to travel. Making allotments available to enable people in High Wych to supplement their food and to use their extra time will have been important during such periods of change and unrest.

We see that the provision of allotments was important: for growing vegetables, for an out-of-house activity and in this area, nowadays as much as then, as offering a continuity with an older, field-based, agricultural way of life.



*High Wych allotments today; photograph by Theo van de Bilt*