

## **Background to Sunningdale Allotments**

### **Up to 2007**

The Parish Council took on responsibility for the allotments in 1895 at a time when it was the “in thing” for councils to do. However, it appears that, similar to most other councils, its initial enthusiasm waned after a couple of years, and not a great deal happened here until the 1980s when the landowners, St. John’s College Cambridge, wanted to build 29 4-bedroom detached houses on the site.

The plot holders formed the Allotment Holders Association to fight any proposed closure of the site. Fortunately, the planning application was turned down, although a deal was eventually struck whereby the College was given permission to build the three large properties which are adjacent to the car park, and in return the Council was given the freehold of the remainder of the site, as well as the Village Hall.

Norman Davis, councillor and briefly chairman of the Council, was subsequently responsible for creating the basic infrastructure of today’s site, including: the entrance from Church Road, the gates, the car park, the “roads” to allow vehicles to drive onto the site and the deployment of four water tanks.

Plot holder Joan Brightwell became a councillor in the 1990s and she was responsible for the laying of a drainage pipe to take rain water from the Village Hall and allotment car parks down to the ditch to offset standing water problems on plots near to the car parks.

The Allotment Holders Association put itself into mothballs in 1997.

Read the [History of Sunningdale Allotments](#) for further information.

### **2007-2010**

I became involved at this point, acting as a liaison between the plot holders and the Council. During this period, I was heavily involved in the following:

- The addition of three standpipes
- The erection of two deer fences along the southern and eastern borders of the site. The owner of the property at the east end of the site subsequently put up a wooden fence to replace that particular deer fence
- Various improvements to the site, as described in the [History of Sunningdale Allotments](#)
- The introduction of annual plot inspections, including the setting of criteria for them
- Measurement of the plots and the production of a site map.

It would be reasonable to say that I was the principal driver behind these changes. Except for jobs that were contracted out, physical work was principally carried out by Graeme Kennedy,

the council groundsman at the time, and myself, with significant contributions from plot holders Joseph Arioli and Fred Parfitt.

### **2010 – present**

I ceased to act as the official liaison between plot holders and the council in 2010. However, the message did not get through to many plot holders who continued to make a beeline for me in lieu of anybody else to listen to their woes.

I performed around 70-75% of all site maintenance tasks between 2010 and (say) 2015. Geoff Newis began to contribute significantly after he arrived, particularly helping with off-season tasks (Nov- Feb).

I arranged a meeting of plot holders in 2018 to discuss allotment matters, getting across the message that on some sites plot holders had degrees of independence, ranging from complete independence where they effectively ran the site, to varying halfway-house solutions where responsibilities were split between them and the council.

The consensus of the meeting was that the Sunningdale plot holders were not interested in any independence. They wanted to press the Council to do more. Arguably, the main result was that the council increased the rent of an average plot by £5, and in return they employed contractors to mow the common parts once a fortnight from April to October, excluding dry periods when the grass did not grow.

Other maintenance (to my knowledge) which has been carried out by the Council since then has comprised:

- John Rose has pruned the beech hedge in the car park annually and applied weed killer twice a year in the car park area and along the deer fence line
- the contractors used brush cutters one year (either 2020 or 2021) to cut down holly seedlings on the other side of the deer fence
- John tackled the privet hedge on one occasion (2020?)
- a contractor was employed in the spring of 2024 to prune the privet hedge and some of the hollies etc on the other side of the ditch.
- More significant work in recent times has been the replacement of all the wooden parts of the gates and the laying of gravel in the car park and the approach from Church Road. Both jobs were carried out by John Rose.

With the exception of one season when Julia at the Council did it, regular site maintenance, most notably off-season tasks, has continued to be organised by me, and the work carried out by a small number of plot holders: Geoff Newis, Liz Roberts, Diana Vernon-Smith and myself, with the Council usually being limited to the beech hedge pruning and weed killer applications that were mentioned above. A number of other plot holders have occasionally

performed some of the tasks, including Stephen Kitson and Peter Stanaway. By way of an example, [here is the off-season maintenance information for 2023-2024](#).

### **Miscellaneous**

**Rent.** On two occasions I have carried out surveys on allotment rents across the UK. The rents at Sunningdale are low when compared to other council-run or independent sites. There are also some private companies whose objective is to make money out of renting plots, at sums which are staggeringly exorbitant. [Here is one example](#).

**Tenancy changes.** Before the arrival of the previous Council regime (in 2015?) I was often asked by the Council to show available plots to individuals on the waiting list and give them the background to the site. This arguably helped to speed up the process of change of tenant, as the Council did not need to set aside time for this task. This no longer happens.

**Council.** It took me the best part of a year (2008) to establish an effective relationship with the Council during Christine Gadd's tenure. I would describe my relationship with the Council during Ruth Davies' period as clerk as poor to virtually non-existent. Examples of Council behaviour include: general failure to respond to emails from plot holders; not being amenable to having meetings; failure to do some of the maintenance jobs that they had agreed to do, *et cetera*. In general, it has displayed a relatively high-handed approach.

Apart from the notable exceptions of Norman Davis and Joan Brightwell, both mentioned previously, councillors who have had responsibility for the allotments have only been evident by their total absence. Note that I am quietly ignoring attendance at best allotment judging / prizegiving. It remains to be seen how Matthew Newman, the latest incumbent, ultimately fares although he has shown more interest so far than his predecessors did.

**Information Technology.** I set up a website in 2006. It was of some interest .. but not to any of the plot holders on our site! I got rid of it in 2008, keeping some material which I continue to host on my own personal website, including the history of the site, the site map, and a couple of articles which may be of interest to new growers. I have added a couple more web pages in recent years: [FAQs](#) and [General Site Information](#).

The plot holders' email group was set up several years ago in the wake of the systematic thieving that occurred during one season. The primary rationale was to alert other plot holders when problems such as this happened. At the time of writing, the group is run by Stephen Kitson (plot 15) and myself.

**Plot Measurements and Site Map Creation.** I originally carried out this job around 2007, and the Council (unsurprisingly) seems content for me to continue to be responsible for them.

### **My Personal Twopenneth**

I have researched and penned a brief history of allotments in England. This has led me to the view that few councils are pro-allotment nowadays. At best, they grudgingly put up with

them, and at worst, they try to get rid of them. Successful sites tend to those that are wholly or partially independent of a council. The idea that a council can be totally relied upon to effectively administer and maintain a site is in my opinion “strictly for the birds”.

During Christine Gadd’s tenure as chairman of the Council, although she was undoubtedly a control freak, she was shrewd enough to realise that I was willing to ensure reasonably effective site management with some help from the Council. However, the Buxton / Davies regime was more interested in exercising control than ensuring that an effective job was done.

While I accept that allotments are inevitably at the bottom of the Council’s list of priorities, the use of the limited time that they have available is far from effective. Improvements to the service can only come from involving plot holders in the process of managing the site.

Minimally, this should include: nominated plot holder(s) to show vacant plots to individuals on the waiting list; brief meeting(s) to agree site maintenance work (doing this by email does not work in my experience). In terms of carrying out the work, plot holders already contribute significantly, albeit we are talking about a small number.

The Council should really do more than they manage at present. If they want to increase the rent to cover any additional work then perhaps we could start with some transparency as to how the current rent is spent.

Finally, as I have indicated, I have been organising site maintenance work since 2007, apart from Julia at the Council doing it for one year. I do not intend to continue after March 2025. This means that I will no longer attempt the thankless task of communicating with the Council. However, I am content to do my share of the actual maintenance work.

BK

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