

Allotments are back in demand, thanks to a new breed of enthusiast. Trouble is, developers are also keen on a nice city plot. Over a million have been lost.

BACK to the LAND

Kathryn Forster and Michael





It's Sunday afternoon and the rain is coming down in Mancunian buckets. Down on the Ivygreen Road allotments in Chorlton, there's not much you can do except shelter beneath a humble roof, sit back and watch your spuds grow.

Which is exactly what Ron Smith is doing. Except that his roof is not all that humble. His hut at the far side of the site (which, regularly washed by the nearby Mersey before the flood defences were built, appears as fertile as the valley of the Nile) is not so much a shed as a commodious villa constructed entirely from materials retrieved from skips: green front door with stained glass panel; double glazed windows; newly constructed veranda; fireplace (decorative only).

On the wall hangs an ironic portrait of Bill and Ben, the flowerpot men, a map of southern Canada and an image of a prize-winning racehorse. There is also a carpet beater, a cabinet bearing a bottle of HP sauce, a table on which a candle in a bottle burns and a shelf of gardening books. Plus a copy of Gray's Anatomy, which suggests that plot holders may come here for a little basic surgery when the weather is bad.

Smith is taking his ease in one of two maroon velour Parker Knoll armchairs (his is a recliner), opening the occasional can of lager and dreaming of his next camping trip to Canada (hence the map). He talks of growing up in Chorlton, of playing by the river and of how he learned his gardening skills from his dad.

He relishes the joy of growing fine food and eating it while it is as fresh as can be, of watching the birds on this green oasis just off a grid of terraced streets, of meeting all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds among the bean poles and fruit bushes. He seems a very happy man.

The hut is a social centre. Veteran Ivygreener Jim Chapman used to pop in most days for a whisky, before he died a couple of years ago (his concrete greenhouse has been restored and re-erected on the site's community area). Now Greg Bowey, elderflower connoisseur, and Mark Flowers (known as Potter for reasons that are not entirely clear) drop in.

Flowers took on his allotment five years ago when about six plots were unused and demand was slack. Now Ivygreen has more than 60 eager gardeners on its waiting list. "The plot is not on a big enough scale to save me much money but you can't beat the quality and taste," says Flowers. "And you come down and see good people. It's a little bit of time to yourself. I can come straight from work – I'm a teacher – and spend half an hour here and then go home completely relaxed. It's good for the soul."

Allotments in their present form have been with us for about 150 years and were established to help the urban poor provide food for their families. Estimates suggest that there were almost a million and a half plots when Britain was digging for victory during the second world war but the present total is thought to be around 300,000, with many already lost to developers who long to stick desirable semis where compost heaps once stood. There is a now an upswing of interest (hence the Ivygreen waiting list) fuelled in part by concerns about food quality and cost.

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But the 21st century allotment appears to have another function: it is a utopian refuge with a social structure built on cooperation and collaboration. Or at the very least a place where you might enjoy swapping the odd vicia faba for a maris piper or two. And the new allotmenter does not fit the stereotype of some old bloke with loam under his nails, a cloth cap and a way with curly kale. Many, having put away their spades, take to their computers to pass on tips and post proud pictures of sprouting carrots.

Catherine Braithwaite, a busy fine arts publicist with a large plot at the back of her garden in Flixton, Greater Manchester, got digging three years ago. "I agreed to take on the plot on a sunny day in August and said to myself, 'Yes, I can do that'. It was overgrown with head-high grass and brambles, under which I discovered fruit bushes – raspberries, gooseberries, blackcurrants.

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Josh Steiner & baby



Sarah Cobbe

Most of the allotment is cultivated now – we are just planting out the final third and I have bought a second-hand greenhouse for £25.

“I try to go every weekend and perhaps pop out for an hour or two on a working day through the week. It sounds a bit hippyish, but there are only natural sounds there and I feel a great sense of peace. My job can be quite stressful with editors and clients shouting at me. But when I go out and do some digging, I feel that the connection with the soil is a very calming experience. It seems now to be more about getting away from everything than growing the veg. You are working with people but not disturbed by them. It’s a very meditative experience, as good as a yoga class for helping me switch off completely.”

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The therapeutic value of digging, hoeing, weeding and growing is recognised on Merseyside, where the Family Refugee Support Project has helped refugees and asylum seekers find some kind of inner peace through allotment work, while avoiding the enforced idleness demanded by the asylum decision process.

The scheme was established in 2001 by Swiss-born psychotherapist Margrit Ruegg and had at one point seven plots worked by 18 families from around the world who had suffered trauma or post-traumatic stress.

The scheme was featured in three short films for Channel 4, out of which grew the 2007 feature film *Grow Your Own*. Scripted by Carl Hunter and Liverpool writer Frank Cottrell Boyce, the film tells how a fictional allotment tended by locals becomes a microcosm of Britain as Iranian, Zimbabwean and Chinese migrants arrive to take over plots.

Back in Manchester and within a wreath’s throw of the immense Southern Cemetery, another project is exploring a collective approach to allotment cultivation. The Lost Plot, developed following permaculture workshops three years ago, is worked by a group rather than an individual. “It’s a flexible community model,” says Josh Steiner of Manchester-based Action For Sustainable Living. “There are three or four really committed people involved at any one time and they take responsibility for watering. Now it’s up and running, I feel I will be connected to this piece of land for years to come. My baby’s placenta is buried there, with a tree to mark the spot.”

Clare Walker, standing by a shed containing two ancient volumes of the *Popular Encyclopaedia of Gardening*, explains that she signed up in June 2007 after seeing a notice in *Unicorn*, the grocery that is Chorlton’s shrine to organic broccoli and Fairtrade porridge. “I’d been chatting to friends about wanting to do a bit more gardening – I’ve always grown tomatoes and wigwams of beans but I wanted to do more. There was a meeting the next day so I thought ‘Wow – serendipity’. I went to the meeting and came down here on a Sunday.

“I want to be with people who know more than I do. And I love digging and weeding – I’m not afraid of hard work. And the benefit at the end is that you get to take home some fabulous fruit and veg. I put these broad beans

in a few weeks ago and it looked as if they were never going to come up. Now there are flowers on them. It’s tremendous.”

Walker has become a Lost Plot missionary. “We want to recruit more people to come in who wouldn’t normally know about allotments or who wouldn’t think they had the opportunity to go for one or wanted a go before taking on an allotment of their own.”

The Lost Plot boasts a curious sculpture featuring a plant-filled bath, a loo and several washbasins. Ivygreen has nothing quite so dramatic on its well-tended acres but there are glimpses of allotmenter individuality. Sarah Cobbe, site secretary and plot holder for 15 years, has potatoes growing out of an old linen basket, French beans about to leap up the frame of an old patio umbrella and lettuces flourishing in cloches converted from old water cooler bottles. And then there are her scarecrows: a couple of pound-shop Easter bunnies with outsize ears which you would think would dive for cover at first sight of a blue tit, let alone a crow.

Perhaps they are a lucky charm, bringing blessings on Cobbe’s two plots which each year deliver strawberries, marrows, courgettes,



Chris Cyprus



gooseberries, asparagus, onions, sweet corn, broad beans, cherries, blueberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, blackberries, herbs and almost any other fruit or veg you can think of. “Sometimes I’ll come down in the evening intending to pick something for tea. I intend being here for ten minutes and end up staying for three hours. On a summer’s evening you can be here till the sun goes down. It’s just really lovely.

“It’s enjoyable and nice to feel you are achieving something, being close to the earth – all those sort of cliché things really. I don’t do it to save money but I’m sure I am when you think of the cost of soft fruit. Yesterday I dug some new potatoes up and cooked them for tea. It was great.”

Artist Chris Cyprus, based in Mossley, Tameside, would probably enjoy the Lost Plot sculpture and Cobbe’s bunnies. But they will have to wait. “I’ve always had this thing about sheds – the colours, the shapes, the textures. They’re like time capsules, aren’t they? Then I started finding sheds on allotments. It grew into an obsession and I painted nothing else for two years. Now I’ve got an allotment myself.”

Influenced by Van Gogh’s paintings of farm workers, he has introduced into his allotment paintings people with backs bent as they weed or lift a fork. “It’s like escapism, isn’t it? I’m not into football or pubs or anything like that. I was looking at society, at the rapid over-development of the town where I live. I found that the people on the allotment were not chavs or anything. They are very relaxed, caring-sharing sort of people. Maybe I was doing a bit of soul searching underneath it all.”

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But the allotment world is not all Arcadian bliss because there are predators lurking at the gates to the plots. In 1996, Manchester City Council declared as “surplus to requirements” 88 allotments at Edge Lane in Openshaw. But the plot holders fought a long running battle and ministers eventually decided that the sale of the site was not justified. There is now a waiting list for plots and this year the rescue team won an Allotment Society cup for its resistance campaign.

It’s not an isolated case. Diggers from the Eastleigh and Bishopstoke Allotments Association in Hampshire fought doggedly for almost five years to stop their local council selling two sites to a developer. They went as far as seeking leave for a judicial review but still lost, exposing as far from perfect the legal protection allotments are supposed to enjoy. The council now has its eyes on a third site.

Meanwhile, on plots so far free from attack, the digging, planting and harvesting goes happily on. By now the sun should have come out at Ivygreen and Ron Smith will have risen from his Parker Knoll to do what needs to be done. Perhaps, back home and taking his ease after a Radox bath, he will have logged on and read this message from an anonymous blogger in Accrington: “I saw a wren up the allotment today. It was only about four feet away from me whilst I was weeing.” We can only hope for the sake of the cabbages that he or she means weeding.

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