Allotments in 19th-Century Lincolnshire

J. A. Perkins

Lincolnshire, and the northern part of that county in particular, has been commonly conceived of as an area in which agricultural labourers in the nineteenth century were liberally provided with allotments. The Malthusian William Thornton stated in the mid-1840s that ‘In Lincolnshire, the practice of allotting to them [the labourers] small portions of land of half an acre in extent, at the rent customary in the neighbourhood, to be cultivated in their spare hours, has now become pretty general.’ Over forty years earlier, according to Arthur Young, the allotment system was already widespread. In 1801, the *Annals of Agriculture* reported on ‘the counties of Lincoln and Rutland, where it is common management for the poor to have land and cows’. In 1808, Young found it ‘impossible to speak too highly of the cottage system of Lincolnshire, where land, gardens, cows, and pigs, are so general in the hands of the poor’.

Statistically, the extent of the allotment system in Lincolnshire in the first half of the nineteenth century is impossible to determine with anything approaching accuracy. A return of 48 Lincolnshire and Rutland parishes in 1800 claimed 753 agricultural labourers as being in possession of land and cows. In the late 1840s on the *Annals of Agriculture* almanac of Jan 1850 for the county of Yarborough in northern Lindsey it was said to be ‘desired that, where possible, the labourers should have a cow as well as a pig, and arrangements are made to forward so desirable an object’. On the same estate in the late 1840s ‘Gardens’ were claimed to be ‘almost universal’ and, in addition, ‘many farmers assign a piece of land annually besides, where the garden is less than a quarter of an acre, all ready manured and prepared, in a turnip field’.

Figures are available for the extent of allotment holding in many individual parishes. In the small wold parish of Saxby in 1834, for instance, 50 labourers were said to ‘have each a cottage, a garden or two roods of land, and ground for keeping two cows’. At Tetford, in 1844, there were said to be 26 ‘tenant labourers who occupy land under the Rev. J. Stockdale’. A study of ‘Allotments and the Problem of Rural Poverty’ places Lincolnshire among the four English counties in which allotment schemes were known in 1833 in over 70% of the parishes. However, this attempt to enumerate the extent of the allotment system is biased by the existence of large numbers of small allotment schemes, which are known in 1833 in 70% of the parishes. However, this attempt to enumerate the extent of the allotment system is biased by the existence of large numbers of small allotment schemes.

Although the precise enumeration of the extent of allotment holding in north Lincolnshire is impossible, the impression of contemporaries that it was proportionately greater than in most other parts of England is probably correct. Nevertheless, there were wide variations in the incidence of allotments between the different regions of north Lincolnshire. In the areas in which small farms predominated, such as the Isle of Axholme and along the River Witham, and in the pastoral marshland, there were fewer allotments than in the arable uplands because there were fewer landless labourers. On the uplands allotments were much more common in the southern wolds district around the market town of Spilsby, where they were said to exist almost in every village, and in the small ‘closed’ villages on large landed estates such as those belonging to Lord Yarborough. In the Gainsborough district, where they were ‘anxiously sought after’ in the 1840s, allotments were common only on the gentry estates and then they were a relatively recent innovation. William Hutton first allotted gardens to the labourers on his estate in the villages of Gate Burton, Knaith, and Scotter in the year 1832. According to one newspaper correspondent from Kirton, writing in 1844, the allotment ‘system has hitherto made little progress in the northern parts of Lincolnshire’. Similarly, at the end of the 1840s it was said that in the area of Horncastle Union in south-east Lindsey, ‘Many cottages have no land at all attached to them’.

The relatively high incidence of allotments in North Lincolnshire is partly explained by the comparative leniency of enclosure and the low overall density of population in the area. The nineteenth century allotment system grew out of the enclosure of the village wasteland and was initially a substitute offered to the agricultural labourer for the former cottagers’ rights on the common waste. Lincolnshire still possessed relatively large areas of waste land in unenclosed parishes by the end of the eighteenth century. This applied especially to the thinly populated areas of naturally poor soils such as the wolds and the Lindsey Cliff. At Glenworth on the Lindsey Cliff in 1808 Arthur Young saw ‘some large pieces [of land] under various crops, that were in a most slovenly and wretched condition, run out, and almost waste; and on inquiry found they were allotments to cottagers, who, each knowing his own piece, cultivated in severalty within a ring-fence’. Young considered this to be ‘a strong instance to prove that their [the cottagers] shares ought always to be given in gross; they [being] unequal to any other tillage than that of a garden’.

The fact that land was not the scarce factor in production in the period 1750 to 1850 in North Lincolnshire made it with the farmer’s while to be able to attract the labourers in order to attract the tie labour — the scarce factor in production — to the farm. Generally speaking, it cannot be said of Lincolnshire that the farmers were ‘bitterly opposed’ to allotments for agricultural labourers. There were a number of tenant farmers who, like Israel Brice of Risby House Farm in Welby parish, allotted half an acre of garden ground to each labourer ‘free of expense’. According to the *Annals of Agriculture* in 1801, in Lincolnshire, ‘The [allotment] system is as much approved by the farmers as by the poor people themselves.’ For the allotment of a small portion of land, up to half an acre, the farmer was offered the prospect of reduced poor rates, a more contented labour force effectively tied to the farmer’s employment, and the possibility of improved labour productivity arising from the larger and more balanced diet available to the labourer.

The problem of labourers tiring themselves by devoting their energy and effort to their allotments, which accounted for the opposition of farmers to allotments in some areas, could be overcome by using the farmers’ own draft animals to perform the heavy work of ploughing and harrowing in place of space culture. According to one farmer in the Spilsby district, for instance, ‘My system is
to let the men have a rood each, ready cultivated; they pay 26s. a rood; I carry the potatoes for them; this is best, because the men don’t waste any time cultivating their land, which is the case when they have gardens.9

For the farmer to perform the task of cultivating his labourers’ allotments economically, the best method was to set aside a portion of the arable fields of the farm for allotments and to move the allotments each year of the rotation. In contrast to allotments provided by the parish or by the landlord, allotments on the farm gave the farmer an additional weapon for the control of his labour force. Such allotments were demonstrably a privilege granted for employment on a particular farm, and they offered no prospect of independence to the labourer or even temporary support during harvest or strikes. On the other hand, the labourer derived certain advantages from this particular form of the allotment system. Where the labourer’s plot changed every year as part of the rotation on his master’s farm, ‘all fear of the land becoming sick for want of a change of crop’ was removed. More important perhaps, the labourer did not have to undertake the back-breaking work of spade culture in his few leisure hours.9

The allotment system was strongly supported by numerous members of the landowning and farming classes in Lincolnshire. ‘A Lincolnshire Freethinker’ writing in the 1790s considered that:

Every labourer ought to have as much land at a moderate rent as will enable him to keep well, at all times of the year, one cow; and a good garden, by which he may keep a pig or two, and rear a few lambs on cow’s milk. And whenever a labourer’s family increases to half a dozen children, he ought to be enabled to keep two cows; and to these should be added, a comfortable dwelling-house, a cow-house, and a pig-stye.10

Early in the following decade Francis Rockhill of West Ashby expressed the opinion that ‘In all future enclosure bills . . . a clause ought to be inserted authorizing the commissioners to set apart a portion of sward land for the use of the cottagers’ as summer pasture for their cows. John Parkinson of Asgrobby took practical steps in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to ensure the provision of allotments to the poor, knowing as he did of ‘no method which would ease the minds of cottagers so much’. ‘On my own estate’, Parkinson informed the readers of the *Annals of Agriculture* in 1801, ‘my cottagers have lived very comfortably under me from my first possession of the estate, a period of twenty-five years’. Parkinson also acted as steward of the estates of non-resident landowners in the Horncastle district, and wherever possible he extended the granting of allotments to cottagers on these estates, having ‘found that the greatest part of them improve their land and pay their rents equally as well as the farmer’.11

On 29 July 1831, a ‘well attended’ meeting was held at Horncastle to consider ‘furnishing the labouring classes with allotments or garden ground’. A committee was elected and a subscription was opened for the purpose of hiring suitable land for allotments, but within a short time the project was defunct. On 18 February 1836, the subject was revived with a meeting at Horncastle to hear an address by the Revd W. M. Pierce as honorary secretary. The Revd Pierce was then initiating the allotment system in the later 1830s. When attacked in the local press in 1838 for pluralism — he was the incumbent of three clerical livings — it was pointed out in his defence that through Pierce’s ‘instrumentality almost every poor man in his parishes has an allotment of land’.12

Over the whole period from 1750 to 1850 the extent of the allotment system was by no means static and at the same time the nature and function of the system was subject to change. Although the pace of change was slow, the period witnessed the growth of large farms at the expense of small, and despite some efforts to maintain them in being as a class number of cottagers in Lincolnshire steadily declined. In the process the function of allotments changed from the provision of pasture to cottagers and small farmers to assist their survival, to the provision of a small area of land to the agricultural labourer as a means of tying him to the land and of conditioning his pattern of social behaviour.

Landowners provided allotments for agricultural labourers from a variety of motives and for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the most important group of motives were firstly, benevolence, philanthropy, a feeling of social responsibility, and a social conscience. Secondly, allotments were provided in an effort to reduce pauperism and the poor rate, which yielded a pecuniary return to the landlord by enabling him to raise the rent of his land. And thirdly, the provision of allotments often represented a response to periods of pronounced rural unrest — an effort to restore cohesion to local society and exercise more social control over the labourer. In most instances where landowners converted land into allotments a combination of motives operated. However, as there was a marked increase in the number of cottagers in Lincolnshire in the early 1830s following the Swing Riots of 1830–1, it was most probably essentially fear that moved many landowners to take practical steps to create allotments.

Allotments never figured as a demand of the labourers during the Swing Riots of 1830–1. The threatening letters at the time were mainly concerned with the immediate grievances of low wages, high food prices, and winter unemployment which was blamed on the threshing-machine. Despite the fears of the possessing classes a comprehensive social programme involving the overthrow of the established order and a return to some conception of ‘Merrie England’ was never articulated at the time. If such a programme had existed, allotments would have formed a poor substitute for peasant proprietorship.

Initially, allotments were conceded because it was widely held ‘that where there had been allotments there had been least unrest in 1830, [or] more specifically that individual allotment-holders refrained from joining in the unrest’.13 In fact, however, the former view may be incorrect overall because the unrest was concentrated in the southern and eastern counties where allotments were most widespread — in supporting local opposition to local government — and the latter was an unknown quantity where the unrest involved anonymous arsonists operating at night.

After they had recovered from the shock of the Swing Riots, the possessing classes supported allotments as a means of conditioning and controlling the social behaviour of the agricultural labourer. As Perry of the LondonLabourer’s Friendly Society informed the meeting at
Horncastle in February 1836, by means of allotments. "The moral influence which they, the higher classes, especially the landowners, thus acquire over those humble occupants is decidedly great." The expected effects of the allotment system on the labourer were succinctly put by Perry, in that:

"It gave him a stake in the soil, and an interest in national prosperity — it put it in his power to rise in the scale of moral existence, through the medium of his own industry — it formed a connecting link between himself and his landlord or master; enabled him to eat a better meal, and wear better clothes; taught him to depend more upon himself and less upon his parish — inspired him with self-respect and independence of mind — gave him the means of training up his children in early habits of industry and virtue — withdrew him from the alehouse and the demoralizing influence of bad company — and imparted to him the spirit of enterprise and tone of moral feeling which at present so little characterize our peasantry."14

In fact, the landowners of Lincolnshire were already aware of this benefit of the allotment system. When C. K. Tunnard of Frampton, allotted roods of garden land to labourers in Kirton and Frampton in November 1830, the *Stanford Mercury* commented:

''What can we urge to further this excellent design? Surely reason and interest combine to prove its utility: the poor man, no longer compelled to become a mere beast of burden, would feel it his duty to uphold and support those plans which should be for the mutual benefit of himself and his landlord, and, instead of a dark and howling wilderness, we might reasonably look for industry, plenty, and honesty. Knit together by a powerful union of mutual interest, the farmer and the labourer would emulate each other in promoting the general good. The poor man would feel that he had an interest at stake in the peace and prosperity of his native land, and would no longer look with a wishful eye to the dubious glories of a distant home."15

The allotment schemes of the 1830s abound in restrictive rules, which no tenant farmer would have accepted, and which were designed to discipline the labourer. The allotment tenants of Sir Culling Eardley Smith at Caistor in 1833 were subject to the rule that: "If any occupier be convicted of an offence against the law, or bring his family upon his parish, or be guilty of grossly immoral conduct, or of insolence to travellers on the road, or to gentlemen who reside in the town or neighbourhood, he will cease to hold his allotment the following Michaelmas, without any compensation for manure." In addition, "No work [was] to be done on any of the allotments on the Lord's day, except that of taking up such vegetables as may be required for the consumption of the day." Considering that labourers worked a six-day week from sunrise to sunset little time was left for the cultivation of the allotment and unsatisfactory cultivation brought dismissal from the tenancy.

A similar Sabbatarianism pervaded the rules for the tenancy of allotments at the villages of Morton and Hanworth, and in addition, it was "absolutely insisted upon that every person taking a garden shall regularly attend divine worship, or show cause for being absent; that he bring up his children to the like practice, and that the habit of swearing, and above all, of drunkenness . . . be immediately discontinued."16 Perhaps for the clergymen, who were so actively involved in promoting the allotment system, it was a means of ensuring a large audience on the sabbath. Whatever the cause for such rules they did appear, as Samuel Sidney put it in 1848, to be "founded on the erroneous principle, that it is only sober, decorous, religious people who deserve to eat potatoes, cabbages, and onions."17

Clergymen were the single most active social group of the countryside in the advocacy of the allotment system, but it could not be said that they acted purely from motives of benevolence. The Anglican Church in the first half of the nineteenth century was in competition with an expanding non-conformity, and allotments carved out of the glebe provided a captive audience for the parish church as well as a profitable income from allotment rents. In many instances the Church of England clergymen acted as the moral police of the established order and allotments were a useful weapon in the exercise of that function. The 'good results' of the allotment system on church land at the village of Tetford were 'seen in the respectability and general good conduct of the labourers. Not all clergymen, however, favoured the conversion of church land into allotments for labourers. When a vestry meeting of the parish of Nettleham decided, in March 1845, to let 21 acres of church land 'in allotments of a rood each to the labouring poor, at 10s. per rood,' the vicar opposed the move fearing the rent would not be paid and the vicar's churchwarden re-let the land to the sitting tenant."18

In the first half of the nineteenth century allotments were advocated and created in many instances as a means of combating pauperism and of reducing the poor rate. As a means of reducing the pauperism which had "within the last 20 years made rapid strides," a south Lincolnshire resident recommended in 1831 'the letting of small portions of land to the labourers' to be cultivated by the spade. At a meeting of the farmers and labourers of Freiston on 10 February 1831, 'John Coupland announced his intention of offering eight acres of land to be divided amongst 16 labourers, for spade husbandry; the rent to be, if paid by the labourers, 7s. 6d. per half acre, but if by a pauper 15s. per half acre; the latter payment is an encouragement to keep free from parochial relief.' Instances of poor farmers paid into the allotments to distance the correlation between low poor rates and the prevalence of allotments were not lacking. Arthur Young, for instance, gave the following figures for 48 parishes in Lincolnshire and Rutland which were collected on his tour of the area at the end of the eighteenth century. In 9 parishes in which over half the poor had allotments and cows the poor rates were as low as 3½d. on every £1 of assessment, whereas in 13 parishes where few or none of the labourers had cows the poor rate was a high 5s. 11d. Unfortunately, however, Young gave no information as to the relationship of the assessments to the actual value of property or of any variation in this relationship between the different parishes. Furthermore, he omitted to include the soil type and farming practices of each village and the ratio of population to land in each parish, both of which factors had a bearing on the incidence of allotments and the level of the poor rates."19

Later allotments that were created virtually on the whim of the landlord or the farmer, or in reaction to rural unrest, tended to be smaller than allotments for pasture waste by the enclosure act of the parish or carved out of the waste by the parochial authorities. Allotments of half an acre with additional pasture land for a cow were common in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Allotments created in the 1830s, on the other hand, rarely extended beyond a rood of garden ground. The latter applies particularly to allotments to labourers.
In January 1833, Sir Culling Earldom Smith decided to let a quantity of land in allotments of one rood each to the poor of the market town of Caistor. The tenure of the allotments was conditional upon the acceptance of the allottees to the many restrictive rules and regulations that the "Stamford Mercury", with regret perceived that, in consequence, the allotment will be but partially taken. In fact, however, 'The rules were read over, in the presence of the applicants, on the day of letting, and gave general satisfaction; as a proof of which, 50 lots were immediately taken, and many persons wished to be allowed to have a second pie'. Smith's generosity was welcomed by the rate-payers from an expectation of decreased pauperism and assessments but many expressed dissatisfaction at the boon of land being conferred only on the poor. In response to these feelings, Smith ordered his agents in January 1835 to offer in allotments of five acres each the large piece of land last annually used as the Caistor race-ground, and containing 85 acres of land, for the particular accommodation of the tradesmen and others of Caistor. At Caistor, therefore, as a consequence of the allotment movement 17 tradesmen received allotments of twenty times the size of those of the poor.

The provision of allotments to the middle class at Caistor by Sir Culling Smith was, in part at least, designed to secure support for Smith's political ambitions to represent North Lincolnshire in the House of Commons. By 1840, however, Smith had relinquished his interests in the area and sold his 1,200 acre 'Caister Estate' including 'The Closes of Pasture Land, which before the division into allotments formed the old Race Course'. Within two years of Smith's departure from the area, the Earl of Yarborough, employing the same method to secure political support in the town of Caistor. In June 1842, his lordship allotted portions of land for the convenience of the inhabitants of Caistor within a short distance of the town, at a very moderate rate per acre, which [gave] great satisfaction to the supporters of Brocklesby, as his Lordship's political opponents had made subservient to their own purposes the apathy (as they termed it) which [had] been shown towards Caistor.

Whatever the reasons for the growth in the number of allotments, by 1840 the produce of allotments was beginning to be regarded even to take prizes at the horticultural and horticultural shows in north Lincolnshire, which had formerly been the preserve of the clergy. At the annual meeting of the Horncastle Florid and Horticultural Meeting on 15 September 1840, the correspondent of the "Stamford Mercury" was particularly struck with the number of articles sent by the cottagers. 'The establishment of such institutions', the correspondent continued, 'cannot but be productive of much general good as well in fostering a taste at once healthful and improving to those in higher ranks of society as, its stimulating those in humble walks to quiet, and industrious domestic habits, the best antidote to the evil spirit of the times.' Not all of the 'higher ranks of society', however, welcomed the intrusion of 'cottagers' into competitive flower and vegetable growing, especially when they began to win prizes. Of the Louth and Neighbourhood Florid and Horticultural Society's annual show, held at the Infant School on 29 July 1841, it was reported that:

A heavy charge of partiality has been brought against the society by a poor man, who is such a connoisseur in flowers as to excel in a decided degree his rich competitors, not infrequently eclipsing their glory by the sudden exhibition of his own superior specimens. The complainant is a journeyman cabinet-maker; and the jealousy of his rivals on the present occasions led to the refusal of his claim to exhibit flowers, on the alleged ground that he was not a 'cottager' as described, but a tradesman.

It would appear that the clergymen exhibitors had no objection to relegating the vegetable section of the shows to 'cottagers' or to permitting the latter to exhibit flowers where they had little chance of winning. The threat of artisans in the floral section, however, was found most disconcerting.

The artisans of the market towns were the group that appears to have taken the most advantage of the allotment movement. When, in 1831, the select vestry of Alford 'carefully examined the demands of the allotment tenants' and awarded prizes of four 'handsome' tea-kettles of different values, having a suitable inscription engraved on the bow of each, 'the best prizes were awarded to mechanics.' To the labourer, however, the allotment was purely functional as a means of supplementing a low income in order for his family to subsist.

Whether or not allotments made a significant contribution to improving the lot of the agricultural labourer is a debatable question; a question that was answered in the negative by some writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. C. D. Barnett, writing of allotments in rural Surrey, considered that 'the value of the produce must not be put very high' because of the small area of land for which little manure was available and the poor quality of seed that the labourer was able to afford from his low wages. In addition, the productivity of labour devoted to the spade culture of a tiny allotment was not likely to have been high. According to G. F. Miller, writing at the beginning of the present century, 'the very lowest point of agricultural wages I could find anywhere in the course of two months' incessant rambles and enquiry, was in a locality where allotments were most general and most thriving.' The implied tendency of allotments to depress wages by tying the labourer to the land may have been largely an effect specific to the later nineteenth century period of rural depopulation. On the other hand, there is no reason why it should not have served to depress wages in the first half of the century, particularly in the short run when, as is often the case, labourers were bargaining for harvest piece rates. This would apply especially where the allotments were provided by the farmer, although the latter was also in a position to put pressure on the parish or the landlord who provided allotments. In general, however, the labour shortage operating in north Lincolnshire agriculture reduced the effectiveness of allotments as a wage bargaining counter of the farmer, and their principal function was that of disciplining the work and social behaviour of the labourer.

NOTES


3 Lincoln, Railways and Stamford Mercury (hereafter LRM), 19 September 1843, p. 292, 29 November 1844.


5 Young, op. cit., p. 460.

6 LRM, 4 June 1841; Annals of Agriculture, XXXVI, 1801, p. 438.

7 LRM, 4 June 1841; Annals of Agriculture, XXXVI, 1801, p. 438.

8 Reports of the Special Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture, London, 1845, p. 521; LRM, 23 March 1832; Hull Advertiser, 8 November 1844; Public Record Office, MH, 32, 22.
9 Sidney, op. cit., p. 90.
12 LRSM, 5 August 1831, 26 February 1836, 9 February 1838.
14 LRSM, 26 February 1836.
15 LRSM, 12 November 1830.
16 LRSM, 1 March 1833.
17 Reports of the Special Poor Law Commissioners, 1845; op. cit., pp. 272–3.
18 Sidney, op. cit., p. 91.
20 LRSM, 24 June 1831, 18 February 1831; Annals of Agriculture, XXXVI, 1801, p. 538.
21 LRSM, 1 March 1833, 25 January 1835.
22 LRSM, 22 May 1840.
23 LRSM, 17 June 1842.
24 LRSM, 18 September 1840, 6 August 1841.
25 LRSM, 7 October 1831.