

## **Report from the Chair**

**January 2017**

2016 was a good year for the Society – even if the weather played a few tricks. More members than ever won awards for their high standard of cultivation and it was especially good to see so many new members among the winners at our very successful Awards Evening in October. Once again the Town Council congratulated us on the fine condition of the sites, and on letting 96% of our plots. They understood that we are doing our best to bring the relatively few neglected plots back to cultivation. It's worth recalling that in our Rules members must 'keep the allotment clean and in a good state of cultivation and fertility.....', cultivation means growing crops and flowers - even one season of neglect means a lot of work to get the plot back to productivity and it can soon become unletably neglected. So, like eating an elephant, the best way is little by little! With uncertain times ahead it's a positive thing to 'Grow your own health' (as we say on our new notices) and the plot is a constant source of good food as well as relaxation for the mind.

After nearly five years in the role I will be handing over to a new Chair at the AGM in May. I want to thank the great team I've worked with on the committee – the meetings have been serious but fun and I hope you feel we have managed the Society's affairs to the benefit of all our members. Special thanks go to my fellow Trustees Carole and Roger; I've been lucky to have been part of such a competent and enjoyable small group.

My hope for the future is we continue to support each other and help those who give so much time to our Society and do a fantastic job – the Site Representatives, Roger and his helpers in the shop, Jim who manages the lettings, Rod on the website, Chris and Ralph who have been keeping an eye on our machinery, Chris Wilson who leads on Awards, plus so many other people who care for the sites alongside working their own plots.

Good growing next season – it will be a good one I'm sure!

Lin Norman  
Hon. Chairman

## The 2017 Annual Plan

As always the process for the Annual Plan starts in September each year. We set the budget for the coming year, and after allowing for all our normal overheads we decide how much we can spend on improvements and machinery for our eight sites. Your site representative puts forward a request for funds from the society for any projects on your site. They also have to make an action plan for such projects, which in most cases requires help from volunteer plot holders. After the committee agrees which projects can be funded, they are included in the Annual Plan for the coming year and this is the basis for work to be carried out. In 2016 we concentrated on machinery and replaced some of the older mowers. We also invested in larger mowers for some of the bigger sites such as Aldwickbury and Piggotshill. In 2017 Aldwickbury Action Plan is to erect a new shed, again with the help of volunteers. There are smaller projects on other sites, but none of these can be achieved without your help. In April 2016 we held a successful Questions and Answers session for new plot holders, with a panel of experienced members giving advice and answering questions on how to get started. We aim to hold something similar in 2017.

Carole Pamphlett  
Hon. Treasurer



*The pond built by a working party of plot-holders on Piggotshill site in 2016: an example of what a group of volunteers can do! Lin Norman*

## The “Clay” soils of our Allotments.

It is commonly believed by our plot-holders that the soil on their plot is “clay”. By and large, this is not entirely correct. The real situation is a bit more complex and, to me, interesting. Our sites are largely on the sides of the – now dry – valley in which Harpenden sits (Churchfield might be the exception to this story). The soils on these slopes overlie (“mantle”) the Chalk, which might be present at depths of only a few centimetres but can be at many tens of metres.

The “mantle” is largely composed of stones (up to 30% or more if you are very unlucky), about 20% to 25% clay-sized particles, and a very large, but variable amount of very fine silt. Some of the clay has been left behind by the dissolution of the Chalk – but very little. Many of the plots are extremely stony and a large proportion of the stones can be flints left behind when the chalk dissolved, but these in their turn have been mixed with stones from other sources by processes controlled by glaciation and thence by incorporation into deposits laid on terraces by earlier versions of the River Thames. The silt is loess: wind-blown dust, – the same kind as that which envelops large parts of China, Mongolia etc. from time to time. In our case, the dust was almost certainly blown out of the bed of the North Sea when sea levels were much lower and the North Sea wasn't there. Many of you will have noticed that the subsoil of your plot is coloured between red and orange and is compact and very stiff, the latter being due to the large proportion of silt particles rather than clay particles.. The redness is a relict of warmer climates (think of the red soils around the Mediterranean). Not all these processes went on at the same time, so we have a complex residue as a result.

Clay particles are platy and these plates tend to lie parallel to each other like the pages of a rather rumpled book. Most of the clay here is strongly related to mica. The mica particles have, for us, an annoying property: they do not take up all that much water and thus have little to release when they dry. The soil thus tends to be cloddy. A smaller percentage of the clay particles, whilst platy, have different water-adsorption and release properties. They dry out more readily and this makes the soil crack. This can be useful to plant roots and diggers looking for somewhere to get their spade or fork in. This kind of water-related cracking is known as “shrink-and-swell”, depending on whether water is leaving or arriving.

The silt is much the bigger nuisance. Loess particles are not platy. They tend to be like very small tennis balls. They pack very tightly together indeed and leave very small spaces between each other into which water can enter and leave. However, the silt mass does not shrink or swell much so you end up with soil that is either like concrete or cheddar cheese. It is the silt that makes the subsoil so compact. One can well understand why people regard this stuff as clay. The silt also has another irritating property. If you mix this silty material freely with water, for example on a soil surface under heavy rain or heavy watering, then the silt particles separate quite readily from each other, i.e. they lack cohesion. You then get a layer of silt – often referred to as a “cap” - on the surface of your plot. This cap, which might be only a few millimetres thick, can dry out very quickly and form a very hard layer that seedlings find very difficult to get through. About the only answer available to us amateurs is to keep the amount of organic matter in your soil as high as possible. Organic matter can effectively ameliorate some of these undesirable properties and behaviours.

Officially then, our soil is a **silty clay**. Those who wish to try their hand at *real* clay soils should visit places such as Wrest Park, the Ouse valley, the Vales of Oxford and Aylesbury, the Carse of Stirling, and some of the Devon valleys. Take some very strong arms with you.

Peter Loveland

## **Garlic: to buy or not to buy?**

Last October I visited northern Sicily. On a visit to a local market I bought two bunches of garlic- at one Euro each. The time was opportune, for on return I planted the bulbs in the ground on my allotment. They were up by January! Garlic likes a period of cold, so planting in Autumn or early Spring stimulates growth. But where do you buy your garlic bulbs?

Dr D.G. Hessayon in *The New Vegetable and Herb Expert* says...‘buy a head of garlic from a supermarket...’ Tony Briggs (*Growing Vegetables* published by the RHS ) agrees, recommending bulbs ‘...saved from a previous crop or bought from a greengrocer.’ However Caroline Foley in *The Allotment Handbook* says ‘..start with bulbs from a nursery or seed market as they will be certified free of disease. Afterwards grow from your own stock.’

I have not had any disease on my plot from my mafia bulbs, but had I bought them from the local supermarket would Piggotshill now be infested with who knows what?

Bob Harry

*Note: If garlic bulbs are firm, free from discoloration and look healthy, it is unlikely that they will carry disease. I do not think there is a certification scheme for garlic planting material in the UK, but certified bulbs from some other EU countries may be available. Ed.*

## **Poultry pellets (organic) v Growmore (inorganic) fertilizer: which gives the best yields of potatoes?**

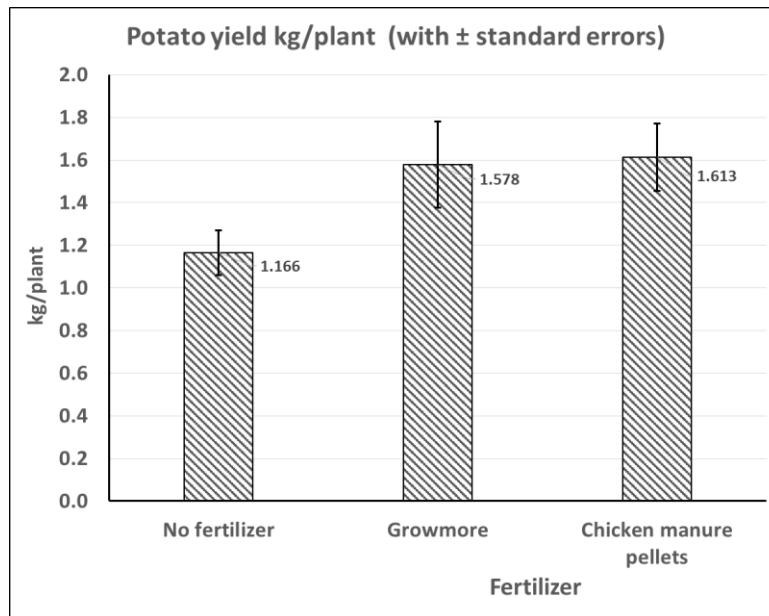
I have observed that dried chicken manure pellets seem a popular fertilizer with many allotment holders. Is this because they are ‘organic’ and so seen as ‘better’ than that nasty, inorganic Growmore? But don’t be deceived – chicken manure pellet fertilizer, like compost, can be called ‘organic’ simply because it comes from an organic source (i.e. chickens or peat bogs). But the chickens could be intensively housed in cages, fed on feed containing GM ingredients and generally treated badly. The compost could come from a nature reserve – it can still be called ‘organic’. Any fertilizer that really is ‘Organic’ (Capital ‘O’) in the ‘must-be-good-for-you-and-its-more-sustainable-anyway-even-if-it-isn’t-proven’ way, will almost certainly state that it is approved by the Soil Association or similar body. And that is fine. The use of the term ‘organic’ is legitimate - but is clearly wide open to abuse. Many companies do not go out of their way to state clearly what they mean by ‘organic’. And why would they want to shatter that illusion if they can, quite legally, trade on people’s ignorance and charge a premium price for a non-premium product? Is it deception? Is it a scam? You be the judge – I’ll rely on evidence.

I wanted to answer the questions – how do chicken manure pellets pellets (2:2:2) compare with Growmore (7:7:7) fertilizer in terms of their effect on the yield of main crop potatoes?

**Method:** I applied ‘Miracle Grow’ Growmore (inorganic) fertilizer (7% N; 7% P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>; 7% K<sub>2</sub>O) at 200 g product/m<sup>2</sup> and ‘Miracle Gro’ chicken manure pellets (organic) (2% N; 2% P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>; 2% K<sub>2</sub>O) at 700 g product/m<sup>2</sup> to sub-plots on my Topstreet allotment, prior to ridging up. I also had no fertilizer control plots on each of the two replicates. Thus the amount of nutrients supplied (14 g NPK/m<sup>2</sup>, equivalent to 140 kg NPK/ha) was the same for both types of fertilizer and was the rate that came out best in my last year’s potato experiment. The cost of the fertilizer products was identical, at £4-50 per 3.5 kg box (Notcutts’ prices). Within each sub-plot I planted four chitted tubers (variety Kestrel on one sub plot, Desiree on the other) on 7 and 20 April 2016 respectively, 12 inches apart in 34 inch rows. Thus 8 tubers were planted for each of the three treatments and tubers were matched for size pre-planting. Mean tuber weight = 123 g Kestrel; 115 g Desiree.

Growing conditions were fairly good and all plots were treated twice with Bayer Garden Fruit & Vegetable Disease Control to prevent blight but not watered artificially. Foliage was cut off with shears and potatoes dug up on 26 July (Kestrel) and 8 September (Desiree). The weight of tubers for each plant was recorded.

**Results:** The yields were similar for both varieties, averaging 1.401 kg (Kestrel) and 1.510 kg (Desiree) tubers per plant over all treatments, including untreated. This is equivalent to 53.2 – 57.4 t/ha – a good commercial yield. As yields were similar for both varieties, data was combined for analysis purposes.



- The no fertilizer yield (1.166 kg/plant) was equivalent to a commercial yield of 44.3 t/ha – a fairly good yield reflecting the high background fertility of the plot.
- There appeared to be a benefit to using either sort of fertilizer, as the figure shows. Compared with the no fertilizer plots, this increase was 35% with Growmore and 38% with chicken manure pellets.

- However, the relatively high variation in this experiment and limited replication meant that there was not quite a statistically significant difference between the untreated and fertilizer treated plots at the generally accepted 95% confidence level (pooled S.E.  $\pm$  0.159; Least Significant Difference (L.S.D. at  $P \leq 0.05$ ) = 0.467).
- Lowering standards to a 90% confidence level (always a good ruse for desperate researchers) *does* give a significant difference between untreated and fertilizer treated plots (L.S.D at  $P \leq 0.1$ ) = 0.386). (Thus untreated yield of 1.166 kg/plant plus 0.386 = 1.552 – both treated yields are higher than this). Phew!
- There was clearly no significant difference in yield between the two fertilizer treatments: both averaged 1.6 kg/plant (to 1 decimal point).
- Although the cost of the fertilizer products per kg was identical, Growmore (7:7:7) has 3.5 times as much nutrient per unit weight as the chicken manure pellets (2:2:2). Or, to put it another way, for every £1 you spend on Growmore, you will need to spend £3-50 on chicken manure pellets to have the same effect.

**Conclusions:** Applying 200 g Growmore fertilizer or 700g chicken manure pellets/m<sup>2</sup> to plots prior to forming ridges gave a useful increase (35% - 38%) in yields of potatoes compared to using no fertilizer. There was no evidence that the organic chicken pellets were better in terms of yield effects than Growmore, despite being 3.5 times the price per unit of nutrient. Chicken manure pellets may contain other useful nutrients – but none was listed on the packet. They may release nutrients more slowly – not necessarily an advantage with potatoes. They might increase the organic matter content of the soil – but they are a VERY expensive way of achieving this. So why use chicken manure pellets when perhaps they are not even ‘Organic’? I really don’t know. Anyone want to buy the rest of my chicken manure pellets at an inflated price? I’ll even write ‘Organic’ in big letters on the packet if it would help.

Stephen Moss

## Earthworms

Below is the worm factsheet which I researched for school and for which I have used information from the website [www.opalexplornature.org](http://www.opalexplornature.org) for reporting on worm findings. It would be good to encourage people to do this as the data is needed and March is the time to start. Opal is the OPEN Air Laboratories network.

Earthworms must mate to reproduce, even though one earthworm contains both male and female reproductive organs. Eggs are formed in a slime tube that slips over the worm's head and forms a cocoon or capsule in which they incubate. Eggs develop in the cocoon into tiny worms which crawl out through one end when ready to emerge. Cocoons vary in size and shape and are about 1/25 to 1/3 inch long. Some fast-maturing worms mature three to four months after hatching and will start their breeding cycle.

## How to make a wormery

### Materials:

- a 5 litre plastic drinks bottle
- black paper, cardboard or material
- crushed chalk (or 'pea' gravel can be used instead)
- sand
- soil or compost
- dead leaves
- earthworms
- a marker pen

### Instructions:

Cut the top off the plastic bottle. Prick some holes in the bottom of the bottle so that excess moisture can escape (but not worms). Put about 25 earthworms into the bottom of the bottle. Cover them with a thickish layer of soil or compost. Fill the bottle with alternate layers of soil, crushed chalk and sand. (The chalk and sand layers need only be thin). Mark the levels of the layers of soil, sand and chalk on the outside of the bottle with the marker pen. Place some dead leaves on top – preferably broken up into smallish pieces as these are what the worms need for food. Wrap the cylinder with the black paper, cardboard or material to keep out the light. Remember to label your wormery, so that everyone knows what it is. Keep everything damp – not wet – and leave for several days. Lift the cover and observe what has happened. The soil lines should become all mixed up as you see how the worms work the soil

### Notes:

There should be roughly 85% soil and 15% other materials in the wormery. The wormery needs to be kept somewhere cool and once set up can be left for one or two weeks. If you leave it any longer than this, the worms are in danger of dying. The worms can be released where they were caught. After another week or so, the wormery can be set up again.

## Earthworms Factsheet

- Earthworms have no head, no brain and no eyes. They have a pointed end (snout) and a blunt end (tail). They have nerves just under the skin all the way along the body. They are sensitive to light all over their bodies so can sense, but not see, light and dark.
- Worms have no teeth or jaws, but they do have lips. This means that they cannot chew food, but can give it a nasty suck! They can't eat food larger than 2mm.
- Worms find their food using their incredible sense of taste and smell – they have 700 taste buds on each millimetre of snout!
- Earthworms move using the four bristles they have on each segment of their body. If attacked by a bird or animal they can use these bristles to anchor themselves in the soil.
- Worms are both male and female. Because they live underground and move around slowly, this is a big advantage. It means that they can mate with any worm they meet in a tunnel.

- If a worm is cut in two, and if the cut is near one of the ends, it can grow the bit back after a while and carry on living. However, if the worm is cut in half, it will die.
- Worms eat many leaves and drag them underground, improving the soil for plants.
- Worms breathe through their skin. They have lots of blood vessels under the skin, which help absorb oxygen from the spaces between bits of soil.
- Every bit of soil in a park or garden has been through a worm several times.

Marcia Dorey

*Note: Charles Darwin studied earthworms for much of his life and his last scientific book, published in 1881 shortly before his death, was entitled "The formation of vegetable mould through the action of worms, with observations on their habits". This was a summary of his studies, on which much of our knowledge of earthworms is based. At the end he commented that worms "have played a more important part in the history of the world than most persons would at first suppose". Ed.*

## **Rootstocks - updated**

Fruit trees will not reproduce true to their variety by means of planting seed (pips or stones) because they are genetically not sufficiently uniform. Therefore to retain the characteristics of any particular variety they have to be propagated vegetatively by means of cuttings, rooted suckers, or by grafting onto rootstocks. Usually it is unsatisfactory to grow them from cuttings or suckers, as they grow too large, may not develop a good root system, and may take a comparatively long time before they fruit. Grafting or budding a piece of the desired fruit variety onto a chosen rootstock gives control of tree size, fruit size, and can shorten the time to produce a fruit crop.

The reproduction of fruit trees by budding and grafting was well known to the ancient Greeks in at least the third century BC and probably to the ancient Egyptians a thousand years earlier. The practice was probably brought to Britain by the Romans. At first the rootstocks used were wild relatives of the cultivated fruit, such as crab apples and wild cherries. Later, use was made of seedlings, suckers, and fruit varieties which root very easily, such as the Burr Knot apple (one of the varieties on the Percy Bradbury Memorial plot at Piggotshill). The development of modern rootstocks was started in 1912 at the East Malling and Long Ashton Research Stations (near Maidstone and Bristol, now closed or under threat of closure) by R. G. Hatton and B. T. P. Parker. This work led to the range of vegetatively-propagated and virus-free rootstocks in use today. For each of the major tree fruits, such as apples, pears, plums and cherries, there is a choice of rootstocks available to suit local conditions and give various sizes of tree. Usually the more dwarfing the rootstock, the earlier it will promote a full crop of fruit. Rootstocks can also influence disease resistance, cold hardiness and root anchorage. Trees on the more dwarfing rootstocks need permanent staking. The rootstocks used for pears are quince.

Although rootstock breeding in the UK has more or less ceased, a number of new rootstocks have been developed in temperate climates elsewhere which are now being used in Britain. If



you buy a new tree you may find that it is grown on one of these, of which some are included in the table below.

## Rootstocks for fruit trees

<i>Rootstock variety</i>	<i>Approximate final size of tree*</i>	<i>Rootstock variety</i>	<i>Approximate final size of tree*</i>
Apple**		Plum (including most "stone" fruit except cherry)	
M27	4 – 6 ft.	VVA-1 (Krymsk 1)	6 – 8 ft.
M9	6 – 8 ft.	Torinel	6 – 10 ft.
M26	8 – 10 ft.	Pixy	8 – 10 ft.
MM106	9 – 11 ft.	Plumina	8 – 10 ft/
MM111	10 – 12 ft.	WA-VIT	9 – 11 ft.
M25	14 – 18 ft. upwards	Adaptabil	10 – 12 ft.
		Jaspi	12 – 15 ft.
		St Julien A	12 – 15 ft.
		Brompton	15 – 20 ft.
		Myrobalan	20 ft. upwards
Pear		Cherry	
Quince C	5 – 7 ft.	Gisela 5	7 – 9 ft.
Eline	5 – 7 ft.	Gisela 6	10 – 14 ft.
Quince A	8 – 10 ft.	Krymsk 5	10 – 14 ft.
BA29	9 – 11 ft.	Colt	15 – 20 ft.
Pyrodwarf	13 – 18 ft. (not dwarfing!)	F12/1	25 ft. upwards

\* Will also be influenced by soil conditions, fruit variety and pruning.

\*\* M = Malling; MM = Malling Merton

*Updated from the version published in "The Plot so Far" of February 2015.*

David Ebbels

## Some recipes

### Elderflower champagne

(From website "Farm in my Pocket")

#### Ingredients

- Five or six heads of elderflower.
- Two lemons.
- 750g (one and a half pounds) of sugar.
- Two tablespoons of vinegar (preferably cider vinegar).
- Enough plastic fizzy drinks bottles to hold 4.5 l (1 gallon) elderflower champagne.

Plastic bottles are better than glass because you can give them a squeeze to see how much pressure has built up, and if you forget them for a few days they won't explode – the crimp at the bottom will pop out instead, - and the noise of the bottle falling over will alert you!

Note that there is no added yeast in this recipe. The flowers are not scalded or sterilized, which leaves the wild yeasts naturally present on the blooms to do the fermentation for you.

### **Method**

- Pick nice young flower heads before the flowers have started to drop petals or turn brown. You'll get pollen on you, but don't worry – it doesn't stain. Use the flowers promptly or the aroma will change and become unpleasant.
- Put 4.5 litres (1 gallon) of water in a large lidded saucepan or bucket.
- Add the elderflower heads (having shaken any bugs off them first) and two sliced lemons. Put the lid on, and leave it for 24 to 36 hours.
- Strain the liquid through a clean cloth. A sieve will do fine if you don't mind a few petals or tiny bugs in the drink, and it won't alter the taste one bit.
- Add 750g (one and a half pounds) of sugar and two tablespoons of cider vinegar, and stir until all the sugar has dissolved.
- Pour into fizzy drinks bottles. Put the tops on to keep fruit flies out, but don't screw them on tight yet – just stand the bottles in a corner and keep an eye on them. After a few days they will start to make tiny bubbles as the wild yeasts get to work on the sugar.
- After a week or so the bubbles will gradually slow down. Have a taste and see if it has a nice flavour. If so screw the lids down and put the bottles somewhere fairly cool. Give them another few days to generate enough gas to carbonate themselves, and you're ready.

Note: The champagne will continue to work until it has all been drunk and will become increasingly dry. The flavour will lose its freshness. Drink it before this happens but keep a note for next year of the timings to your preferred taste.

### **Blackcurrant cordial**

#### **Ingredients**

- Blackcurrants
- Water
- Lemons
- Sugar

#### **Method**

For each pound of blackcurrants you will need ½ pint of water, ½ lb sugar and 1 lemon (juice and peel). Put the berries and water in a heavy based pan. Cut the lemon in half and squeeze it. Add the squeezed lemon halves and the juice to the pan. Gently heat until the mixture simmers. Continue to simmer for 5 minutes: any longer may spoil the taste. Leave the pan to cool.

Mash the fruit to extract the juice, then press through a sieve. Measure the juice and to each pint add ½ lb sugar. Gently heat through until the sugar has dissolved. Leave to cool and then pour the syrup into sterilised bottles. Put on sterile lids and it will keep for several weeks in the fridge!

Serve diluted as for any fruit squash or use undiluted as a sauce over icecream etc.

## **Chilli jam**

(A recipe after Nigella)

### **Ingredients**

- 150 g long fresh red chilli peppers, or any chilli fruits you have grown - cut up seeds and all - just remove stems
- 150 g red peppers (cored, deseeded and cut into rough chunks)
- 1 kg jam sugar (jam sugar is necessary as there is not enough pectin to set the jam without it)
- 600 ml cider vinegar

(Makes about 1.5 litres)

### **Method**

You will need 6 x 250ml jam jars with screw-on lids

- Sterilize your jars and leave to cool.
- Put the cut-up chillies and the chunks of red pepper into a food processor and pulse until they are finely chopped and you have a vibrantly red-flecked processor bowl. At this stage you may need to add some of the vinegar to the bowl if the mixture is too dry to turn and chop.
- Dissolve the sugar in the vinegar in a wide, medium-sized pan over a low heat. Scrape the chilli-pepper mixture out of the bowl and add to the pan. Bring the pan to the boil, then leave it at a rollicking boil for 10 min.
- Test the mixture for setting point to see if a skin forms on a small dollop placed on a plate in the fridge.
- Take the pan off the heat and allow to cool. The liquid will become more syrupy, then from syrup to viscous and from viscous to jelly-like as it cools.

Keep stirring the cooling mixture and after about 40 minutes or longer, the red flecks should be more or less evenly dispersed in the jelly (as the liquid firms up, the hints of chilli and pepper start being suspended in it rather than floating on it). When you are happy that the pieces will not float to the top but be completely suspended, ladle into your jars and seal tightly. Remember to label it. Eat with biscuits and cheese or cold meats - totally delicious but beware if you suffer from asthma as the cooking fumes have to be experienced to be believed!

Marcia Dorey

## S.H.A.G.S. Office Bearers and Committee Members

(As at February 2017)

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