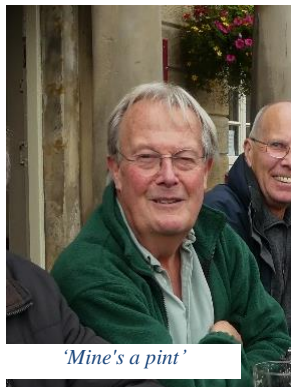


The PLOT so Farm

Newsletter of the South Harpenden Allotments and Gardens Society
Spring 2020

From the Chairman



'Mine's a pint'

Well, 2019 seemed to flash by and here we are at the start of another decade and all is well on the allotments. We celebrated our 50th Anniversary with a well attended barbecue at Piggottshill in the summer, a very enjoyable Awards evening in October and finished off the year with our 5th November bonfire party and our final committee meeting in December with wine and cheese.

Our thanks must go out to the hardworking site reps, without whose help and dedication our sites would return to untidy wilderness. The Society has spent out on new machinery during the year and several machines have been away for repairs, some as a result of overwork but again this year a few machines have been abused, with damaged and broken blades, wrong fuel resulting in seized engines in two of our 2 stroke trimmers. If you are unsure about operating a machine speak to your site rep. We have bought three new wheeled trimmers for our larger sites at Churchfield, Aldwickbury and Cross Lane. Thanks are due to Chris Overton and our late lamented Alan Stevenson who carried out last year's servicing and saved us in excess of £1000 in maintenance costs. We need a couple of volunteers to help with this year's servicing, oil changes, new plugs and air filters, cleaning and blade sharpening. Have you some time to spare ?

Currently we have over 97% occupancy on our sites, but inevitably as rent renewals become due in March there will be some vacancies. Coming up. There are waiting lists currently for Harpenden Rise, Sibley Avenue and Aldwickbury, a couple of half plots at Piggottshill and vacant plots at Cross Lane. Harpenden Town Council are running a page in the next edition of Forum highlighting Harpenden allotments, so we expect an influx of enquiries.

Thanks to all the Committee members for making the last 12 months a success and here's to a happy, healthy and productive 2020.

Mike Cobley

Treasurer's report

In 2019 we had our first rent increase since April 2014 and we are pleased to say that you still seem to think its good value for money, as our lettings figure rose to 98.70 percent of the total number of plots available to rent across all our eight sites. This is the highest level of lettings for a number of years and some sites are fully let. We hope this will continue for 2020. We replaced some of our machinery during the year but we still have a problem with some of our machines being damaged when used by plot holders. Please take care when using our trimmers or mowers as they are out of use when being sent away to be repaired and of course we have pay for the repairs.

On the whole 2019 was a good year for our members, despite some tricky weather. We had a good number of people attending our BBQ in July at our Piggottshill site to mark our 50th anniversary and our Awards evening in October which was held HTC Public hall was enjoyed by many our plot winners.

As always, a special thanks go to our site reps who help maintain our sites. We have no paid staff, so keeping our sites looking good is down to our site reps and any of you that volunteer to help. At the yearly Harpenden Town Council inspection in July they were impressed by the standard of care that had obviously gone into maintaining all our sites. So please continue to support and help your site reps to keep up this good work.

We continue to work closely with Harpenden Town Council and now have a yearly budget and action plan for improvements to our surroundings boundaries. This is in addition to the yearly grant we receive from HTC which was £3100.00 in 2019 and we try to use this money to improve the facilities on our sites.

Carole Pamphlett
Treasurer

Photo competition for 2020

In December 2019 we announced that we would be holding a photo competition in 2020. We recognised that while many of you may love your allotment, for various reasons you may not qualify to win an award in our yearly plot competition.

But we hope that you will be happy to take a picture on or around your plot and send it to us as part of this photo competition. With so many people now being able to take pictures on their mobile phones it should be a lot easier. We asked that you take photos during the season not just when harvesting your produce. A nice picture of your spring bulbs, your first stewberries, your children or grandchildren helping on your plot, your

scarecrow, a beautiful butterfly or an odd shape veg or fruit, something that makes you laugh and would make picture.

Please hold them until later in the year when we will be announcing a new email address for you to send them too. We will be asking that you submit your favourite photos in the first two weeks in September. This should give us enough time to judge your photos and print them in time for a display at our Awards night in October when we will be giving out prizes to our three winners.

This is the first time we have attempted to do something like this online. So please help to make this a success and send us your photos.

A few examples appear in the next column.

Carole Pamphlett

Editorship – Situations Vacant

It's time for a new editor! This will be the final newsletter I'll be doing. If you, or a group of you (the newsletter used to be a team effort), would like to take this role over, please get in touch with me.

Irene Boogerman

Editor

Peat-free compost

New Horizon peat-free compost is now stocked in the Allotment shop. Please consider buying it, as an alternative to compost containing peat.

Peat is vital in storing huge amounts of carbon, which would otherwise contribute to global warming. It is also an important habitat for many types of threatened wildlife, it has a role in water management, and preserves some archaeological sites. In the past, many of the peatlands in the UK have been damaged by drainage, over-grazing, burning and extraction. Some of these sites are being restored, to improve carbon storage and create resilient ecosystems. But much of the peat found in the compost available in the UK now comes from peatlands elsewhere in Europe - and we have a responsibility to protect these precious habitats too.

Both the National Trust (<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/going-peat-free>) and the RHS (<https://www.rhs.org.uk/about-the-rhs/policies/rhs-statement-on-peat>) are now peat-free, and actively encourage gardeners to consider this. You can help by buying peat-free compost for use in your own garden or allotment, and encouraging manufacturers and the Government in their efforts to phase out the use of peat in gardening products. Thank you.

Margaret Charlston

Sent in by our plottolders:



Photo: (c) Stephan Barnard – Cross Lane



Photo: (c) Rachel Reynolds - Piggottshill

S.H.A.G.S. 50th Anniversary celebration

The year 1969 is well remembered for the first manned landing on the Moon, the first test flight of Concorde and the end of the Vietnam war. What is less well-known is 1969 was the first full year of allotmenting for the newly formed South Harpenden Allotment and Gardens Society (S.H.A.G.S.).

There's been a lot of digging, weeding and picking since then, but in early 2019, the Committee began discussing plans to hold an event to celebrate our 50 years anniversary.

Ten years earlier a similar event was held to celebrate 40 years. Activities took place on Aldwickbury site and in addition to a BBQ there were a number of "sporting" challenges dotted around the site with races, games and a photographic competition. The day had been a great success and the Committee wanted a repeat.

However, the Committee felt that times had moved on and a more relevant approach was required. A sub-committee of myself, Chris Wilson, Site-rep at Sibley Ave, along with Jane Keech who with Marcia Dorey looks after Publicity, was formed and tasked with coming up with a plan.

Environmental issues were, and still are, very much in the news and so the Plan we came up with was to recognize the link between allotments and gardens with the environment and wildlife. Our objective; to assemble a group of representative bodies, that during the event could discuss their work with plot holders and their families and encourage good practice and awareness of the role allotments can play.

We also wanted to appeal to any younger family members that might attend and obviously have an enjoyable day for all. Naturally food and drink would be provided and whilst soft drinks would be available members were asked to bring their own alcohol if they wished.

It was agreed the party should take place on Sunday 14th July between 2 and 5pm at Piggottshill, the Society's HQ where power, water and in the event of poor weather... surely not!....the TA Room was available in an emergency. The Shop was close by and even though it was normally only open on Sunday mornings, Roger Gillett kindly agreed to open again during the afternoon. It was also agreed that as the day was to celebrate the Society, put on by members and paid for by the Society, it would only be open to members and close family and not a wider group.

A list was drawn up of groups we might invite namely, RSPB, Herts & Middx Wildlife Trust, Bee keepers Society, Hornbeam Wood Hedgehog Sanctuary and the Rothamsted Research Centre and contact to these groups was initiated. Fortunately, the Society already possessed equipment; we had enough tables and chairs and we also owned a large marquee and BBQ equipment.

Jane Keech was a committed vegan and again in the interests of appealing to all it was decided that Jane would do a separate vegan BBQ.

We had a Plan.....!

First to accept our invitation was Hornbeam Wood Hedgehog Sanctuary and their leader Martin agreed to

bring along live hedgehogs to show to younger members, however it wasn't such good news from the other groups.

Unfortunately, in choosing our date we found we were clashing with the Harpenden Highland gathering, the Wheathampstead Village Weekend and a large wildlife event called "Wildfest" nearby. As a result, the other groups, though expressing their regret, were either already committed or had no members available to attend our function which in the grand scheme must have seemed tiny in comparison to these other major events.

It also posed questions of whether our own members would prefer these events to ours. In the end though the Committee decided to go ahead and we just had to downscale our aspirations.

Our concerns moved to how many should we cater for, our old friend the English weather and, could we find all the bits for the marquee oh and would it stand up!

Two weeks before our Chairman Mike Copley and I met to see about attempting to erect the marquee which had been stored in one of the machinery containers. On first inspection all seemed to be present and we began assembly which can take a while and probably needs four people. Gradually the framework took shape and then the tricky bit, putting the cover on.....whilst making sure some of the frame joints don't come apart. But all went well and the dress rehearsal was completed; a useful exercise ahead of the big day.

On the catering front Chris Wilson, veteran of other celebrations and Awards evening catering was looking after what and how much to buy in and Jane ordered in the disposable tablecloth and vegan food. An extra BBQ was drafted in for this and we were all set. Plot holders offered home made cakes and finger food and other supplies would be bought.

The week beforehand we received an unexpected boost when Garry and Andrea O'Dell, who have plots on Aldwickbury, offered to bring along examples of the wine they had made from grapes grown on one of their AB plots, for visitors to try. We very quickly accepted their offer and the stage was set.

The weekend dawned and the weather? Well it was not wall-to-wall sunshine with sweltering temperatures but at least it was pleasant and dry!

Saturday morning saw the erection of the marquee again. This time it was well tethered in case of a sudden gale. All the tables were assembled in the TA Room. The sausages and burgers plus buns were bought and the soft drinks brought in.

On the Sunday morning whilst Shop and normal allotment activities carried on as normal, final preparations were made. Tables were set up, BBQ's prepared, chairs set out and food began to be put out. Just after midday Martin arrived from the Hedgehog Sanctuary arrived to set up followed by Garry and Andrea who bought no less than 3 wines made from different grape varieties they had grown. The BBQ's were lit and at 2pm off we went.

Members and families started to arrive and the mingling began. The BBQ'ers, Jane with her vegan specialities, Mike Copley and Keith Davidson, Site Rep at Churchfield did their stuff and very soon the hot food was ready, and eating could begin in earnest. The wines

were very much appreciated, and the cake table soon showed large gaps.

Chris Wilson made a short speech and thanked everyone for attending and making it such an enjoyable afternoon. She "looked forward" to celebrating the Society's 60 years anniversary".....!

The eating and drinking continued as gradually people began to drift away. The BBQ's went cold, everything was slowly packed away and the event drew to a close. It had been a busy but enjoyable day and as I returned home the day held a further bonus; England had just won the Cricket World Cup!

On reflection numbers may have been down owing to the clash of events, we will never know, but all in all it was good to celebrate the longevity of the Society and here's to 60 years!

The day after the final clear-up was completed, a donation of £50 was subsequently made to the Hedgehog Sanctuary and the marquee was carefully packed away, along with all the bits and pieces and instructions for erection.....ready for the next celebration!

Roger Glanville
Dep. Chair

How 'Permanent' is 'Permanent'?

Do you remember when wood preservative actually did what it said on the tin, rather than simply adding a bit of colour to fencing panels until the next shower of rain? Likewise, do you remember when 'permanent markers' did just that, and writing on pot labels could be relied upon to remain legible for years? I am sure many allotment plot holders of a certain vintage can relate to this issue. OK, the solvents used might have been carcinogenic, but did they really pose much risk in practice?

I am fed up with constantly rewriting labels so I have decided to conduct a practical test on a range of alleged 'permanent markers' from Edding, Niceday, Pentel, Sharpie and Tiger on plastic plus slate and wooden labels. I have written on both front and back of labels, with one side facing south and the other, unsurprisingly, north. So, one side will get full exposure to the sun and the other no direct sunlight. This experiment, conducted to the most rigorous scientific standards, was set up on 12 January – see photo.



If my expectations are fulfilled, I might even see what lame excuses manufacturers of such markers can provide. I'll provide full results and feedback next year – I bet you can't wait!

Stephen Moss, Topstreet
Slug pellets – an update

Slugs are the bane of many plot holders, and slug pellets are probably THE most commonly used pesticide on allotments everywhere. Sale of metaldehyde, the most widely used slug pellet, was banned in 2019 in the UK, but not in most other European countries, as there was some evidence that it posed an unacceptable risk to birds and mammals. However, this ban was overturned after the High Court in London agreed with a challenge on the legality of the ban, and metaldehyde pellets can legally be sold again. It is likely the ban will be reinstated when the correct procedures are followed, and so metaldehyde has probably only got a short stay of execution. It is also not readily available now.

The only alternative are slug pellets based on iron phosphate which kills slugs in a different way. Iron phosphate affects calcium metabolism in the gut system of slugs causing them to stop feeding and most die, invisibly, underground. In contrast, metaldehyde worked by disrupting mucus production ability and many affected slugs were paralysed and died on the soil surface where they were visible. Despite this big difference in 'visibility' of effect, all the evidence is that both types are equally effective (or equally ineffective) at killing slugs. This is supported by results of RHS trials on the 'Garden Organic' website. See:

<https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/news/rhs-trials-organic-slug-pellets-perform-better-those-toxic-metaldehyde>

One proven environmental benefit of iron phosphate is that it does not leach to groundwater, unlike metaldehyde which is very difficult, and costly, for water companies to remove. But are iron phosphate slug pellets really safer to wildlife? If you try 'Googling' this you will find it a frustrating experience with a lot of contradictory and unsubstantiated information. However, this old American article is informative, worrying and appears well researched <https://www.hostalibrary.org/firstlook/RRIronPhosphate.htm>.

It is probably fair to say that iron phosphate slug pellets are not as safe to wildlife as some companies and organisations like to suggest, despite being approved for 'Organic' use (unlike metaldehyde). Indeed, some of the claims on the 'Garden Organic' website about the safety of iron phosphate are questionable ('Ferramol (iron phosphate) does not have any side effects'). There is some scientific evidence that iron phosphate is *more* harmful to earthworms than metaldehyde. This is potentially of significance on allotments where gross over-dosing with slug pellets is much more likely than on farmland.

Iron phosphate slug pellets are much more expensive than metaldehyde and are also applied at higher rates, typically 5 g/m² instead of 1.5 g/m². It is all too easy to scatter 10x or more the recommended dose, so the key advice should be to measure out the correct amount for the area to be treated. This will help minimise any adverse effects – see photo.

There are, of course, many alternative methods of slug control (e.g. nematodes, beer traps, wool mulches, copper barriers etc) but it is surprisingly hard to find reliable evidence on their relative effectiveness. This is probably because there are many species of slug and they are notoriously difficult to research because their activity is so strongly influenced by the weather.



Stephen Moss, Topstreet

Thank you to Joe Payne for this drawing, which demonstrates aquatic gardening, very necessary in the weather we've been having:



HANDLING MACHINERY – PLEASE READ

After a successful servicing programme last year the machines are currently being serviced by Chris Overton and his volunteers.

There has been some serious mishandling of some of the machines through 2019. Two strimmers were run on straight petrol, with no 2 stroke oil added, resulting in seized engines and written off. One mower broke a blade by hitting a large solid object. One mower had the engine filled with fuel, not in the fuel tank ! Several machines have broken down, but replaced in the sheds with no note or message to the site reps. If machines are returned very dirty the grass and mud sets rock hard, making them difficult to start. Fuel tanks are being contaminated with grass, dirt and debris despite filter funnels being provided in every shed. Fuel cans are not being refilled when they are emptied.

A few rules for ease of operation:

If you are unsure about using the machine correctly please ask before you try.

Check the oil level before starting.

Top up the fuel, using the filter funnel provided.

Pull the starter cord smoothly once or twice before holding in the 'go' lever to start the machine.

The mowers are for cutting the grass on pathways, not for clearing your plot.

When you have finished using the machine, clean it down with a brush/scraper to remove the grass cuttings, especially around the blade area and if available hose off the grass whilst it is still damp. If you lift a machine the air filter must always be uppermost.

If the machine had developed a fault let your site rep know.

If you used the last petrol in the can please refill it and reclaim the cost from the shop on Sunday by bringing your receipt

**Mike Cobley
Chairman**

The next two pages are a reprint of the second ever allotment letter, when Percy Bradbury, our then Chairman, wrote a history of our allotments. Thank you to Chris Wilson for scanning and sending these in.

July 1999

THE PLOT SO FAR...

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"THE PLOT SO FAR" IS THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE SOUTH HARPENDEN ALLOTMENT AND GARDENS SOCIETY, THE ALLOTMENT CENTRE, DARK LANE, SOUTHDOWN, HARPENDEN AL5 1QA

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THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THIS MAGAZINE MAY NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THOSE OF THE SOCIETY

PLEASE SEND LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AT THE ABOVE ADDRESS OR VIA E-MAIL TO:
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CONGRATULATIONS!

To Ken Howell, C J Gardner and Sophie Holmes for winning the Name this Magazine competition. It was a difficult decision to make, as there were so many entries - and some very cruel puns, such as "Has Beans"!

AGM - 30th September 1999 7.30 pm at Park Hall, Harpenden

The South Harpenden Allotment and Gardens Society depends on a small proportion of its membership to make things tick and keep matters on an even and legal keel. Being on the Management Committee demands both enthusiasm and a capacity for unsung hard work, attributes with which your committee are well blessed. Your presence at the AGM would encourage them in their efforts and offers of help would be even more welcome. (*) Each year the Management Committee positions come up for re-election. If you would like to consider putting yourself forward for any of these, please fill in the coupon on page 4 to obtain more information and send it to the Secretary. Alternatively, please talk to the current incumbent of these positions (their names and phone numbers are on page 4). Please note that associate members may not stand for any of the Officers' positions other than Associate Membership Secretary (see Rule 3 of the Society)

(*) quoted with kind permission from the newsletter issued by the Harpenden Society.

Letter from the Chairman (or "A Brief History Of Time")

Dear Member

Before we move into the twenty-first century, I thought it would be interesting to look back at the history of allotment gardening in Harpenden, particularly for those members who have joined us recently.

You will agree, I am sure, that for a rather small town like this, to have some 15 allotment sites is quite impressive. Our Society manages nine of these for the Harpenden Town Council, with the rest being administered by the East Harpenden Garden Club. Except for Harpenden Rise, all our sites are in South Harpenden. The earliest allotments recorded in our town were at Rothamsted where the owner John Lawes (later Sir John), a kind and generous man, provided several acres of land in 1852 to be laid down as allotments for his farm labourers, with more land being added later. He also provided them with a club house, complete with a bar. A Committee was formed to run the club, with rules being agreed by the members.

Unfortunately, this wonderful building was pulled down sometime in the fifties. I, like

many others, often had the pleasure of sitting down on the veranda, to watch my father hoeing his crop of vegetables. Local people always called the allotments by the name of "The Garden Fields" then (see Edwin Grey's book about Rothamsted in the Harpenden Library).

The Churchfield site behind the supermarket in Southdown is one of the oldest, at least 100 years old. Jim Pearce was the last of the several generations of the Pearce family to have a plot there. The site stretched from Churchfield up to the boundary fence of Barnfield Road.

(Continued on page 3)



STOP PRESS

In April a member (who must be a night owl) heard to a nightingale singing at 4 o'clock in the morning on the Piggotshill site. He thinks it was in a hazel tree. Can anyone else confirm a sighting? Have you see any other unusual wildlife on your particular allotment site?

(continued from page 1)

If you stood on the site of the supermarket in Southdown on Good Friday you would observe the plottolders right up the hill, traditionally planting early potatoes.

Our main site is of course **Piggotshill**, which has also quite a lot of history attached to it. You may have noticed the old hedge at the bottom of the site (which ought to be listed, in my view). On the lower site of this hedge plots used to stretch through Kingston House Mowers, which is now the dump. These plots were certainly in existence at the turn of this century. Most of the site consisted of two smallholdings, one owned by a local haulier with horse and carts, and stretched up to Wheathampstead Road. A few years before World War Two broke out the Harpenden Urban District Council bought the site for allotments, whilst the **Harpenden Rise** site was also bought during the War. The Dig for Victory campaign went on its way and people were encouraged to use every bit of garden land for growing vegetables. Even Harpenden Common itself was used for the war effort, with the gorse being grubbed out and potatoes and wheat being grown – the latter a wonderful sight during harvest time!

The **Topstreet Way** site used to be building land. When the builders were called up and the land remained idle, it became known as the Buttercup Field where local children played. Well meaning residents started to cultivate it and eventually it also became an allotment site.

The **Aldwickbury** site previously belonged to the owners of Aldwickbury Manor, part of which was sold to Wimpey, who built High Firs and retained the old name for that area. Eventually the whole site belonged to the Harpenden Urban District Council. The top of the site was worked as allotments much earlier than the bottom half. Mr Jack Welstead (who is still a member) rented

this area as a smallholding for some years and eventually agreed for the site to be incorporated as allotments at the request of Ted Allen, our founder Chairman.

The **Oakley Road** site, which is fairly small with 14 plots, was originally a rubbish dump for the parish in the early 1930's. This has over the years left some traces in the soil, which is very loose and drains easily. Frequently bottles rise mysteriously to the surface and George, one of the plottolders, has a unique collection of these.

Sibley Road, with 17 plots, surrounded by houses, may also be a remnant from the War years. The Society has a site in **Cross Lane** also, which is now under our management.

In the late 1970's negotiations between our Society, the Town and District Councils and the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners acting on our behalf, resulted in some allotment land being released for what is now Somerfield Supermarket (then it was Fine Fare). We were compensated for the loss of land by the Society taking over management of 3.66 acres in Cross Lane plus 0.6 acres in Churchfield, previously owned by the Plough & Harrow Pub.

As you can see, from quite small beginnings we are now administering quite a sizeable acreage. I consider it a privilege to be able to rent a plot of land which can I virtually call your own, on which to grow my own food. With this privilege comes a responsibility to keep it in good shape and to ensure that the Society continues its work for the benefit of generations still to come. See you at the AGM and our 30th Birthday Party!

Percy Bradbury

Famous Gardening Quotations:
"God Almighty first planted a garden. And indeed it is the purest of human pleasures."
Francis Bacon (b.1561-d.1626)

JACK & JIM

JACK: "I CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHY MY BRUSSELS SPROUTS DON'T PRODUCE MUCH OF A CROP. THEY START OFF WELL AFTER I FEED THEM AND MANURE THE GROUND, THEN ONCE THEY REACH ABOUT 2 FOOT HIGH THEY STOP GROWING. WHAT AM I DOING WRONG?"

JIM: "FIRSTLY, I THINK YOU PLANT THEM TOO CLOSE TOGETHER. THEY NEED AT LEAST 2½ TO 3 FEET BETWEEN PLANTS, OTHERWISE THEY GET TOO CROWDED. SECONDLY, THEY HAVE A LONG GROWING SEASON AND THEY NEED SOME FERTILISER AT LEAST TWO OR THREE TIMES DURING THE SEASON TO KEEP THEM GROWING. THEN THEY SHOULD GET TO A HEIGHT OF 4 FEET AND PRODUCE A HEAVY CROP."

JACK: "THANKS FOR THE ADVICE. I'LL TRY THAT NEXT YEAR AND HOPE I'LL BE PICKING SOME FOR CHRISTMAS LUNCH!"

Chris Pratt

Do you have any gardening questions? Please write to Chris at the Allotment Centre in Piggotshill.

Did you know the Society is a Member of the Henry Doubleday organisation, whose magazine is available to read or borrow in the Ted Allen Room every Sunday morning between 10 and 12? Peter Stevenson is the membership cardholder, if you wish to visit their gardens in person. Please contact him if you would like to use the card.

In the Ted Allen Room you will also find a selection of other magazines to which the Society subscribes.

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The editor reserves the right to edit articles for content and length where necessary