

Hackney Allotment Society

Minutes of Annual General Meeting held on Wednesday 3 October 2012 at St Mary's Community Centre, Defoe Road, London N16

Present: Penny Miller (chair), Nancy Korman (secretary), Jason Cole (site rep, Springhill), Philip Pearson (site rep, Springhill), Sarah Kissack (treasurer), Jessica Datta (Spring Hill site rep and minute taker), Rosanna Preston (site rep, Springdale Road), Jack Eldon (site rep, Leaside), Diane Whitworth (site rep, Leaside), Philip Turner (site rep, Queensbridge Road), Henrietta Soames (vice chair and site rep, St Kilda's) and approximately 25 members.

1. Introduction and apologies

Apologies received from: Sofia Craxton, Vicki Yapp, Merel Reinick

2. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the 2011 AGM were agreed as a true record.

3. Report from the chair

Penny Miller as chair made the following observations:

Why we have allotments.

I came across a recently published book - James Wong's "Homegrown revolution" "A revolution in the garden - a completely new range of fruit and vegetables to grow and eat. Whether it's a window box of homegrown saffron, your very own kiwi vine or a mini green tea plantation on your patio, TV botanist and best-selling author James Wong proves that 'growing your own' can be so much more exciting than spuds, sprouts and swedes."

James Wong complains that we all grow what our grandfathers grew, that we are stuck in a 'dig for victory' mentality, that we are ignoring a lot of exotic things that we could be growing instead of spuds and cabbages. At first this really made me think - yes, I do grow what my grandfather grew - he grew potatoes, cabbages, and onions, and seemed to have 20 pet rabbits at the bottom of his garden. But I don't just grow those things - like most of us, I also grow globe artichokes, tomatoes, mange tout, and so on.

But nevertheless, has he got a point, are we stuck somewhat in a rut?

When I came across this book, I was reading a book by Monty Don about his garden in Herefordshire, as featured on TV, which has a vegetable area. He waxes lyrical about his garden in general, but of growing vegetables he says:

By sowing the seeds, getting your hands dirty and relating the soil to the plant, to having to find out the best time to plant and harvest, having to water or worry about the weather, you connect to the real production of food and understanding husbandry.

I felt that Monty was on to something that James Wong isn't, the experience of the process of growing food for yourself, the stuff that keeps you alive. What keeps us alive is

cabbage and spuds, not saffron and kiwi fruit, nice though they may be. And what keeps us alive in what you might call a spiritual or psychological sense is, partly, and we don't really talk about this enough, is the experience of having our hands in the soil, of taking the seed and giving it what it needs so that it will grow and give us what we need. And in the process, almost incidentally, give us that experience that human beings have had for thousands of years, of connection to the earth that nurtures us.

As allotmenters, we are aware of the effort involved in the production of a humble cabbage or spud. We know the value of food as hard won, as not to be wasted. But we live in a big city, we are dependant on big business, for the most part, to feed us.

We know what can go wrong and lead to disaster and no cabbage or spud. We also know that down the road there is Morrisons who have plenty, and always, if ours' fail, so we are obviously in a different position from our ancestors, or from many people in the world now, but we do share that experience in the form that we do, an urban 21st century version, but that still has that ability to nurture our souls and psyches as well as our bodies. I also came across a writer recently called Wendell Berry, an American, who said "*A garden gives the body the dignity of working in its own support.*" - something to ponder.

Frightening statistic:

In Britain we have Britain lost 97% of our fruit and vegetable varieties since 1900. Globally, 75% of the genetic diversity of crop plants was lost in the last century.

We need to do our bit, join a heritage seed library, help conserve diversity in plant genes.

4. Report from the treasurer

Sarah reported that the Society's expenditure over the last year had been greater than its income. Site expenses, including tree work, plumbing, skips and other sundry costs, were heavy. The shortfall was covered by the large amount in the deposit account.

Sarah reported that she had opened a new Co-operative Bank account and introduced electronic banking. More than half of members had paid their rent and dues in this way. Sarah was thanked by a member from the floor for the tremendous job she has done in streamlining the banking and accounting systems.

In response to a question from the floor about the renewal of leases, it was noted that the committee was bearing this in mind and that there had been no problem renewing leases when they were last up.

5. Election of officers

All candidates were nominated and seconded.

Penny Miller was re-elected as Chairperson

Hilary Kerr was elected as Vice-chair

Nancy Korman was re-elected as Secretary

Sarah Kissack was re-elected as Treasurer

Amanda Scope was re-elected as Newsletter Editor

Hugh Nailor and Zarina Patel were elected as Auditors

Site representatives

It was noted that under the Society's constitution site representatives do not have to be elected at the AGM. Reps should be chosen by plotheolders at each site.

Jessica Datta (Springhill) and Merel Reinick (Church Walk) indicated that they were resigning as site reps. The meeting thanked them for their work.

6. Constitutional amendments

The following two amendments were introduced by Sarah Kissack and agreed unanimously subject to change of wording in new para 20 to 'him or her' from 'him and her':

- Add as penultimate sentence to para 4: 'The Executive Officers shall be the Trustees of the Society and Signatories to the Society's banking account'
- Change second sentence of para 20 to: 'All the sums received by him or her on the Society's behalf shall be paid into the Society's banking account and all cheques drawn on that account shall be signed (or electronic payments authorised) by him and her, and countersigned (or co-authorised) by one other of the Executive Officers.'

Site reports

Aden Terrace: We had a good season despite a late start due to weather. We have had a few neglected plots but mostly crops have been good. The thefts continued as they have for the past three years until a helpful neighbour called the police and someone was apprehended, since when no more thefts, except by squirrels. (Maggie)

Church Walk: no report

Leaside: After a slow start due to the ghastly weather, it has been another bountiful year at Leaside. Early crops, such as onions and garlic, did badly and slugs and snails decimated young bean and courgette plants. However, second sowings are now producing healthy dividend. Network Rail eventually sprayed the Japanese knotweed to great effect, but annoyingly refuse to cut back the sycamores which are growing in profusion on their side of the fence. LBH finally replaced broken gates at the top end of the site. We are having an autumn clean-up to clear weeds and other debris in October or November. (Diana and Jack)

Overbury: It has been a reasonably good year for Overbury Street. Most plots were worked beautifully and produced accordingly. Our newcomers had a bit of a slump but responded immediately to a few words of encouragement and we're sure they'll outdo themselves again next year. The site looks a touch neglected but we're organising a clean-up day for mid-October. Still planning to plant a communal herb bed. (Amanda)

Queensbridge: As the only site without running water, this summer's weather was a comprehensive answer to our usual prayers for rain. Despite the full water butts, growing vegetables has not been easy. Spring success with broccoli and rhubarb turned to summer disappointment with simple things like potatoes and

beans failing to crop due to the wet weather. If there is a competition for biggest slug, then we have seen some prize winning specimens. (Philip)

Springdale Road: Like many other sites it has been a difficult year with the weather but we have managed some good crops of fruit and veg later in the year. In September we hired a van and had a good clear out of the site and later ordered a load of manure to share. One plotholder has indicated that they would like to give up their plot this autumn. (Rosanna)

Spring Lane: Despite an erratic season, some lovely crops but sadly repeat thefts of produce in autumn. We are investigating access and have reported to police with positive response. Good work done on cleaning shed and evicting rat family. Plans to do some extensive tree work this winter to open up more growing spaces. (Simon)

Springhill: No thefts this year. Tree work has been undertaken and made plots less shady. Our delivery of compost from East London Waste authority caused complaints from neighbours (not for the first time). Philip (site rep) met neighbours with an officer from LBH and possible alternative arrangements were discussed but no action since from Hackney. This led to a discussion about this compost, which smells quite strongly (and unpleasantly) when first delivered and then fades, and how not to irritate neighbours. It can only be delivered in large loads so is difficult to cover. It was suggested that we ask for winter rather than summer deliveries. (Jessica and Philip)

St Kilda's: Rejuvenated with new shed, new plotholders and the possible erection of a greenhouse.

7. Best plot awards

Best plot awards were won by the following:

Aden Terrace:

Most productive plot: Sue Carling;

Best newcomer: Richard and Susan Kay

Leaside:

Best plot: Elizabeth de Monochaux

Best newcomer: Gill Harris and Al Wallace

Spring Lane:

Best plot: Elsa Hamaz

Spring Hill:

Best plot: Emily Mytton

Small sites:

Best plot: Margaret Roseberry (Overbury Street)

Best newcomer: Jez Paxton (St Kilda's)

8. Items raised by individual members

- Brent Cunningham and Frederica Brooks raised the issue of an exploratory survey of plotholders they carried out to find out about use of pest control. There was a discussion about the use of pesticides on plots. Glyphosate is used in some sites e.g. Leaside to control weeds on paths. Slug pellets are also widely used although many plotholders use organic ones. Other suggestions were made for discouraging slugs and snails including broken egg shells, coffee grounds and copper. Brent suggested the Society enables members to share information which could be via the website or a mailing list. He can send survey results out by email via site reps.
- Jan Kuiper suggested that, as people have to wait so long for an allotment, there was stricter policing of plots to check maximisation of production and notice to quit for those underperforming and that the waiting list be culled. In response, the chair reported that nine plots had been let in the last year and 20+ people had been deleted from the waiting list as they hadn't paid their dues, leaving approx 95 people on the list. The dirty plot letter procedure has been administered more rigorously and vacant plots are let as quickly as possible. It was suggested that those who receive dirty plot letters could be asked whether they would like their plot to be halved and the other half given to someone on the list. However, plots are already smaller than those in other areas and halving them would make them very small.

Jan explained that he had contacted other schemes such Family Mosaic Housing Association's garden sharing scheme but found that after a time consuming vetting process nothing materialised. The LBH scheme aimed at helping tenants with their gardens is not available to those who already have a garden so he is not eligible. Other suggestions were made such as the Capital Growth scheme (www.capitalgrowth.org) which lists 60 food growing sites in Hackney. The committee would welcome members on the waiting list to join so their voice is heard.

- Bron Jones (not present) suggested keeping bees on sites. Penny Miller responded that bees must be the responsibility of one person who has some training and experience and not the Society, and that all plotholders must agree to the keeping of bees on a site [she also noted that there is someone who keeps bees on a HAS site, can't remember who, but would be useful to note for Bron's reference]. There are numerous bee keeping courses available in London.
- Pat Cavanagh (not present) suggested reducing the size of allotments to allow a fairer distribution and reducing the fee to remain on the waiting list (currently £4) which is far in excess of the cost of administration. Sarah explained that this was true with electronic payment and newsletter distribution but not with paper arrangements. There was no support for these suggestions.

9. Any other business

Sarah Kissack offered to make a discounted seed order to the organic catalogue for members if they contact her with their order by the end of October.