**Social reform and allotment gardening in twentieth century York**

Ross J. Wilson

**Abstract**

This article examines the development of allotment gardens in the northern English city of York at the start of the twentieth century. Using archive material and newspaper reports the role of the allotment gardens within wider issues of urban social reform is explored. Through Giddens’s theory of structuration, the manner in which relationships between citizens and the City Corporation of York developed is investigated. In this manner, the place of allotment gardens as a means of understanding wider urban life in Britain can be reexamined. Whilst allotment gardens have only partially featured in studies of civic reform, identity and governmentality, their place as a central feature of working class life in Britain demands that a greater focus of attention should be placed on these plots of land.

Keywords: Allotments, Social Reform, Governance, Structuration, Land Reform, York

**Social reform and allotment gardening in twentieth century York**

Across the northern English city of York, the local civic authority today owns and operates sixteen public allotment gardens, of varying sizes, totalling over a thousand individual plots.

Located amongst lines of Victorian terrace houses, modern housing estates and by common land, known as ‘The York Strays’, where Freemen of the City were once able to graze their cattle, these allotment gardens have proved to be a valuable resource in times of warfare and high unemployment during the twentieth century. In recent years the ‘allotment renaissance’ in York has led to lengthy waiting lists for citizens eager to gain access to a piece of land to cultivate or to use as a space for leisure or relaxation. This trend, which is mirrored in allotment sites across the whole of Britain, is associated with the rise in popular interest for organic food and concerns about environmental change. These associations are certainly quite removed from the needs and desires of York’s first allotment gardeners, working the City Corporation allotments at the beginning of the twentieth century. As the demand for allotment gardens in York continues to rise, their popularity obscures the complex nature of the development of the city’s allotment gardens and this significant aspect of British urban history. By examining the reports detailed by the City Corporation, official correspondence and contemporary newspaper articles the place of allotment gardens as a tool of social and civic reform in York at the beginning of the twentieth century can be assessed. Using Giddens’s theory of structuration, which examines the nature of the relationships between agents and wider societal structures, this analysis will detail how the construction of allotment gardens cultivated the city, its citizens and the local civic authority at the beginning of the twentieth century.

**Growing good habits - the urban allotment gardens**

The place of allotment gardens as a means of reforming and governing the twentieth century city in Britain has received relatively little analysis in the wider histories of urban social life.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Although the issues of governance, identity and civic behaviour have been current areas of study within modern British urban history the allotment site has been neglected as a subject area.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is despite the development of the allotment garden, from an initially minor aspect of working class urban existence during the later nineteenth century, to their prominence in daily life from the earlier twentieth century onwards.[[3]](#footnote-3) Whilst allotment gardens as a key feature of reform in rural Britain have been examined,[[4]](#footnote-4) as to their capacity to alleviate the results of poverty and unemployment, their urban counterparts have not received similar attention.[[5]](#footnote-5) In part, this is due to the complex process of allotment provision across the industrial cities of Britain towards the latter part of the Victorian era.[[6]](#footnote-6) Whilst rural landowners responded to the conditions which beset the countryside during the agricultural depression of the later nineteenth century by providing access to land for agricultural labourers, urban landowners and businessmen were far more hesitant and cautious in letting out urban areas for allotment gardens.[[7]](#footnote-7) Urban allotments were, therefore, initially the product of the largesse of individual businessmen who saw the provision of allotment gardens to their workers as a social or an economic necessity.[[8]](#footnote-8) Liberal reformers advocated the cultivation of the land as a means to aid the urban poor whilst businessmen and industrialists noted the benefits of an occupied and healthy workforce.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Whilst the popularity of these privately owned allotment gardens convinced both the

Tory government in the late 1880s and the Liberal government of early 1900s that allotments could be used as a means of addressing rural and urban poverty, the politics of ‘land reform’ during this period was intimately connected to issues of national identity, politics and wider social change.[[10]](#footnote-10) Cultivation of the land was observed as a patriotic duty across the political spectrum and a means for Englishmen to maintain their vigour, their character and their identity.[[11]](#footnote-11) For example, Jesse Collings, the Birmingham Mayor (1878-1879) and Liberal Member for Parliament (1880-1918), drew on these concepts for his land reform movement in the late nineteenth century.[[12]](#footnote-12) In Collings’s campaigns, a direct link was made between the moral and spiritual health of the nation and the cultivation of land:

‘The combatant in classic story who, when hurled to the ground by his antagonist, gained renewed life and vigour by each contact with Mother Earth, is an apt illustration of the strength and recuperative power of a nation whose people are rooted in the soil’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

By extending the ability to cultivate and to take ownership of land to a broader social stratum,

Liberal and Tory reformers considered that more of the labouring classes could be ‘cultivated’ themselves to participate in ‘civil society’.[[14]](#footnote-14) Land reform was considered particularly important in deterring the spread of socialism by addressing unrest and enabling access to resources within the labouring classes.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, access to land also became a point of principle for the Independent Labour Party as it called for the extension of allotment provision for the rural and urban poor during the 1890s.[[16]](#footnote-16) The socialist group, the Fabian Society, had also published its tract Allotments and How to Get them in 1894, advising workers that if managed properly, allotments could assist in developing an ‘independent spirit’ amongst the working classes.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Cultivation was, therefore, both a political issue but also a very powerful metaphor for social reform and renewal within late Victorian and Edwardian society which was drawn upon to address a variety of issues.[[18]](#footnote-18) Indeed, the legacy of ‘cultivating’ society stems from the earlier eighteenth century notions of ‘improvement’ of both the landscape and the populace.[[19]](#footnote-19) It is within this context that the Small Holdings and Allotments Acts of 1887 and 1908 were passed, which placed greater emphasis on the provision of allotments by town authorities and city corporations as a public amenity which would be open to all.[[20]](#footnote-20) With these pieces of legislation, local authorities were obliged to respond to petitions raised by residents to let allotment gardens in their area. In towns and cities these reforms provided a means for a wide section of working class residents to gain access to land for the first time – they also ensured a distinct relationship was cultivated between residents and their local authority.[[21]](#footnote-21) This is aptly demonstrated with the development of public allotment gardens in the city of York. To examine the repercussions of the development of urban allotments, York provides an example of how relationships regarding access to land were managed and how allotment gardens became tools of physical and moral reform. Indeed, the wider tensions that arose in the competing philosophies of allotment provision are demonstrated in the work of the York City Corporation to develop allotment gardens.

The organisation of allotments in York mirrored the wider, national development of urban allotments and was widely regarded by Liberal and Labour members of the City Corporation as providing a means by which the social problems faced by many residents could be addressed. Allotments were also a key means of acting upon the growing dissatisfaction towards the local authority amongst the urban poor. In its execution, the plan for public allotments in York created a new set of interactions between citizens and the Corporation. The development of allotment gardens transformed both the city’s physical landscape and the manner in which it was governed. Allotment gardens operated to form a means of affecting behaviour within the city, with the aim of alleviating the grind of poverty and diffusing the growing support of socialist parties. This analysis of the relationship between citizens and the wider civic authority utilises Giddens’s theory of structuration.[[22]](#footnote-22) This mode of analysis details the relationship between individual agents and wider societal organisations. Structuration theory examines how the structures of society, such as its governance, its institutions or its cultural mores, shape and frame social behaviour amongst the members of that society. However, this process does not represent a singular transmission of attitudes and behaviours – through performing these actions within a social setting agents act to recreate and remould the very structures in which they operate.[[23]](#footnote-23) The relationships between agents and structures are, therefore, reciprocal; they are enveloped within a reflexive-feedback context, as whilst society structures the behaviour and actions of agents, agents in turn shape and inform the structures of society.[[24]](#footnote-24) This mode of analysis is well suited to the study of the development of York’s allotment gardens as it addresses the transmission and reception of attitudes and values between citizens and the civic authority. In this respect, whilst allotment gardens were developed as a means of encouraging social reform and responsibility amongst the city’s working classes, correspondingly the role of the Corporation also altered as it acted as a landlord to allotment tenants.

**York: politics and society in the early twentieth century**

At the outset of the twentieth century, whilst York had retained its historical distinction as a city of wealth, leisure and taste, it was also typical of many towns and cities in Britain, insofar as the medieval walled city suffered from one of the fundamental contradictions of modern capitalism – the production of wealth alongside enormous deprivation and poverty.[[25]](#footnote-25) Large areas of slum housing, high levels of unemployment and rising prices placed many individuals and families in the city in a precarious situation. This situation was brought to light with the publication of Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree’s classic work, Poverty, a study of town life.[[26]](#footnote-26) In this exhaustive investigation of just under 12,000 families, Rowntree described how the working classes in the city were trapped by a cycle of poverty. Defining poverty as falling below a minimum level of basic sustenance and material existence, Rowntree used the categories of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ poverty to explain the situations that condemned many citizens to deprivation and malnutrition. Primary poverty was defined as an inescapable product of low wages or unemployment, whilst secondary poverty was the result of unforeseen expenses, such as illness or ‘undignified’ habits such as betting and alcohol.[[27]](#footnote-27) Using reports from other researchers and campaigners, Rowntree established that a minimum weekly income of 21s and 8d would be needed to keep an average-sized family in good health – a level of income that many citizens regularly fell below. From these categories, Rowntree estimated that approximately thirty percent of the city’s population lived in poverty; a situation which was described as ‘a fact of the gravest significance’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Whilst the main thrust of Rowntree’s report acknowledged the external factors that could push people into hardship, citizens were also regarded as a danger to themselves; the vices of drinking and gambling were a particular area of concern as they acted as a further drain on meagre resources.[[29]](#footnote-29) Rowntree considered that in these cases the ability of the working classes to lift themselves out of poverty was down to their own sense of dedication to purpose.[[30]](#footnote-30) The condition of poverty for some was, therefore, a self-inflicted state. Rowntree remarked that:

‘It must be remembered that some families are living in apparent poverty in the slums, not because of their inadequate income, but because of their distaste for the effort required by a life among better surroundings’.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Despite the conditions catalogued by Rowntree, the York City Corporation responded to these findings somewhat hesitantly. The structure and brief of the York City Corporation, like the authorities in many other towns in Britain, was formed through the 1835 Local Government Act.[[32]](#footnote-32) The 1835 Act enabled the establishment of the working structure of authorities, with Town Clerks, Officers and working committees forming the backbone of local government.[[33]](#footnote-33) Whilst the influence of these City Corporations was initially limited due to restrictions in their legislative abilities; during the latter half of the nineteenth century their powers increased as Parliamentary Bills devolved greater responsibilities to the provinces.[[34]](#footnote-34) However, the use of these powers was entirely dependent upon the individual authority concerned and successive Liberal and Tory Corporations in York proved particularly reluctant to exercise their abilities to combat the city’s problems. This hesitation ensured that the municipal elections of 1899 and 1900 were dominated by issues of urban deprivation and poverty and how to remedy it. Representatives of the Independent Labour Party, as well as those described as Cooperative or Progressive candidates, represented the emerging trend of what was termed ‘municipal socialism’ in York.[[35]](#footnote-35) For these candidates, the real social ills of poverty and want were caused by the City Corporation of York refusing to become involved in any form of social intervention. As an Independent candidate in the Monk Gate Ward in the 1899 elections, Thomas Anderson criticised the authority for allowing housing to be built in the city which met only the minimum requirements under the by-laws, creating large areas of slum housing.[[36]](#footnote-36) As a Cooperative candidate, George Price decried the City Corporation for a wholesale neglect of their duties owed to the residents of York. The fervour of his speeches won Price far more suspicion than support; he called for the local authority control of water, gas and electricity; improved sanitation in the slum housing areas; the construction of public spaces; and the reorganisation of the tram timetable in the city so it was coordinated with the hours of workers.[[37]](#footnote-37) Though the share of the vote for these candidates was growing, they were defeated at the polls, as voters chose the platform advocated by Tory candidates, such as Joseph Peters, who stood in the Walmgate Ward, against local authority intervention.[[38]](#footnote-38)

However, this defeat at the polls was overturned as the way in which the social problems faced by the city could be addressed returned as a political issue in 1900.[[39]](#footnote-39) Thomas

Anderson, standing now in the Walmgate Ward of the city as an Independent candidate, gained notoriety through his impassioned orations which described the wretched conditions faced by the city’s working classes.[[40]](#footnote-40) William Shaw, standing as a Cooperative candidate, also secured victory in the Micklegate Ward in the same election, prompting the Cooperative

Society of York to announce that:

‘…they succeeded in at last securing a direct representative of the Society, of trade unionism, and of the working classes generally on the City Council’.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The success of these candidates advocating a greater role of the City Corporation in the lives of the urban poor suggested that voters were now becoming increasingly concerned with social conditions in the city. Working class ratepayers had grown frustrated by the successive failures of Tory and Liberal dominated Corporations to address the needs of the citizens of York. Labour, Independent and Cooperative candidates began to gain increasing support amongst disaffected voters. Liberal candidates in the city were unable to find a distinctive voice in this political battle, as whilst sympathetic towards Labour’s policies, the party was synonymous with many of the leading businessmen in York.[[42]](#footnote-42) The Liberals were strongly backed by the Rowntree family, one of the largest employers in the city with their cocoa factory. Both Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree and Arnold Rowntree were firm supporters of the Liberal’s cause.[[43]](#footnote-43) The advent of any large degree of local authority intervention in the city’s social problems was not an option envisaged by these supporters of the free market.[[44]](#footnote-44) However, where the Rowntree family and the Liberals of the city did advocate intervention was in the provision of a series of ‘improving’ activities to assist the working classes to raise themselves out of poverty.[[45]](#footnote-45)

**Allotments and the ‘cultivation’ of the working classes**

A means of providing this route to the mental and material improvement of the working class citizens of the city had been set in place by the Rowntree family through the Adult Schools which had operated since the late nineteenth century.[[46]](#footnote-46) These institutions afforded the workers in the Rowntree business an opportunity for education and significantly opened up the possibility of renting a plot on one of the Rowntree’s Allotment sites. These highly coveted plots were only available to employees of the Rowntree family and the yearly rent of 10 shillings for a plot measuring 345 square yards (approx. 290m2) was affordable for many of the men employed at the Rowntree’s cocoa factory who earned over 21 shillings a week.[[47]](#footnote-47) These amenities were not new to the city; there had been allotment gardens in York since the late nineteenth century, all under the ownership of businessmen who provided plots of land to their workers.[[48]](#footnote-48) In a city beset by problems of poor housing and restricted access to land for the working classes the allotment sites represented a tremendous asset to the citizens of York.[[49]](#footnote-49) Contemporary sources considered that the well-tended allotment site could provide labourers with produce over twelve months that could be worth from £8 to £12.[[50]](#footnote-50) However, the number of plots available was limited; by 1899 only 120 individual plots were provided in the city.[[51]](#footnote-51) Indeed, the popularity of these allotment gardens amongst workers led to owners such as Rowntree’s, steadily increasing allotment sites and offering new plots to their workers.[[52]](#footnote-52) The scale of this development was rapid; by 1906, 450 privately-owned allotment gardens plots of varying sizes had been placed around the city (Table 1).[[53]](#footnote-53)

As part of their lease of the allotment plot, the tenants of the Rowntree allotments in Haxby Road and those run in conjunction with the Adult Schools all subscribed to the ‘York Cocoa Works Horticultural Society’ (Figure 1). This organisation served to assist and reinforce the morally improving message of allotment gardening through the provision of a series of structured actions that created a perception of the value and use of allotments for tenants.[[54]](#footnote-54) For example, the Society ran competitions and contests for allotment tenants offering prizes to the ‘best managed’ and the ‘most productive’ plots. The Society was also notable for its patrons that included the leading Liberals of the city; Arnold Rowntree, Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree and J.B. Morrell were all Vice-Presidents of the Horticultural Society.[[55]](#footnote-55) The ‘reforming’ and ‘cultivating’ nature of work on the allotment site in this way connected to the wider national debates regarding the ‘land reform’ movement in late Victorian and Edwardian England.[[56]](#footnote-56) As notions of access to land for the labouring classes appeared well-suited to the Rowntree’s religious, political and moral philosophy of a society where individuals improved themselves and the society in which they lived.[[57]](#footnote-57) This drew upon the work of the Liberal intellectual Leonard Hobhouse (1864-1929), who argued for an ‘organic society’ that balanced individual rights with the welfare of the wider collective.[[58]](#footnote-58) Hobhouse defined the ‘organic society’ as:

‘The organic view of society recognises an interdependence whereby the individual is modified by the very social relations that he helps to build up’.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Similarly, the Rowntrees’ combined their Liberal political ideals for reform with their nonconformist Quaker principles of moral fortitude and forbearance.[[60]](#footnote-60) These tenets were brought onto the allotment site just as they were incorporated into the cocoa factories.[[61]](#footnote-61) Behaviour and attitudes on these allotment sites were controlled and all tenants were obliged to follow the terms and conditions which had been set out by the Rowntree family in the late nineteenth century. Allotment tenants were provided with eleven conditions which affirmed the importance of the upkeep of the site and the responsibility of the individual tenant both towards their allotment and their conduct on the site. In particular, condition 10 stated that:

‘Betting and Gambling, bad language and the use of Intoxicating Liquors in the Allotment Gardens are strictly prohibited, and any tenant breaking this rule renders himself liable to suspension from the Gardens, and the immediate forfeiture of his tenancy.’[[62]](#footnote-62)

In this manner, the Rowntree allotments served as specific locales within the city where the framework of the ‘organic society’ could be initiated and reinforced through the work of tenants on the allotment site.[[63]](#footnote-63)

**The campaign for public allotments in York**

The popularity of allotment sites amongst the working classes in York and their availability to only a few citizens ensured that allotment gardens became the battleground of the reform movement as the Liberal and the nascent Labour Party sought to use these amenities as a means of addressing the condition of working class residents in the city.[[64]](#footnote-64) The Labour agenda for allotment sites was given a boost with the municipal elections of November 1904, as the Independent Labour Party candidate, Mr. Fred Morley, was successfully elected as a councillor for the Castlegate Ward of the city.[[65]](#footnote-65) After only a month of his appointment, Councillor Morley had written to the Town Clerk requesting information as to the Corporation’s duty and ability to provide allotments for citizens. The increased activism of the Labour movement in York was further demonstrated in the manner that residents in the Holgate area of the city also petitioned the Corporation for allotments. In August 1904 the Town Clerk had received correspondence from a Mr. W. Hoyle of Murray Street, Holgate. The letter was addressed from the ‘citizens of York, resident in the Holgate District’, and contained an application for land on or near Holgate, ‘for the purpose of providing allotments’.[[66]](#footnote-66) The letter was signed by twenty residents and ratepayers of Holgate. The majority of these signatories were railway workers and therefore not eligible for many of the privately owned allotment gardens in the city or unable to obtain the limited allotments operated since the 1850s by the railway companies outside the city.[[67]](#footnote-67) The letter was written with the express intention of activating the Corporation’s obligation under the 1887 Allotments Act. The reference to the 1887 Act demonstrates the commitment and organisation of the residents of the Holgate area of the city to the acquisition of allotment sites. The 1887 Act was set in place by the Tory government of the late 1880s to alleviate the effects of the agricultural depression; it had given local authorities the power to provide allotments when petitioned by six or more ratepayers. However, the 1887 Act proved cumbersome and difficult to use, as it was without any provision that required the compulsory purchase of land for allotments by civic authorities. Indeed, in York, the 1887 Act was interpreted by the City Corporation as largely concerned with encouraging the development of privately-owned allotment sites, as ratepayers were obliged to prove allotments were unobtainable by any other means.[[68]](#footnote-68) Furthermore, the 1887 Act stipulated that allotment sites could only be provided if they were able to run at a profit or were not at least a financial burden upon the ratepayer.[[69]](#footnote-69) Therefore, the 1887 Act could only used effectively by ratepayers where there was a concerted effort undertaken by reformers to insist on its observation by the local authority.

The movement for greater access to allotments in York was monitored by the Liberals in the city. After the inquiries made by Councillor Morley and the letter from the residents in Holgate, during a conference organised by the Friends’ Social Services Committee in January

1905, chaired by Seebohm Rowntree, a call was made that allotments were the ‘cure for poverty’.[[70]](#footnote-70) With rising unemployment in the city, allotment gardens were thereby seen by both Labour and Liberal representatives as a key reform in alleviating the burden of deprivation. With increasing pressure from Labour, Cooperative and now Liberal council members to provide allotment gardens to residents, the civic authority organised an assessment of the requirements of organising and managing an allotment site. As the City Corporation had no experience of setting up or maintaining an allotment site, other boroughs and cities in the United Kingdom that had already created allotment gardens were researched. Municipal authorities in Nottingham, Derby, Sheffield, Bridport and Swindon were contacted and asked to provide information as to the methods of providing allotments and the nature of the contracts between the individual tenant and the Corporation.[[71]](#footnote-71) The main assistance for this process, however, came from the allotments already in the city operated by the Rowntree family. Arnold Rowntree was repeatedly consulted by the Town Clerk as to the manner in which allotment gardens should be constructed and maintained. Significantly, the contracts issued by Rowntree’s to tenants were also taken as the standard form to be replicated by the Corporation.[[72]](#footnote-72) The Rowntree allotments were, therefore, used as the template for the planned Corporation allotments, even down to the stipulations in the terms and conditions. Whilst working class activism was at the root of the movement to secure allotments for larger numbers of the city’s residents, it was the Liberal values of allotments as tools of social reform which would initially shape the development of allotments in York. Allotments would function as a means of reinforcing the ‘rules and resources’ of the Liberal ideology.[[73]](#footnote-73)

**The development of the Corporation allotments in York**

Upon completion of the assessment, the Corporation complied with its legal and moral obligation to provide allotment gardens for the citizens of York. As the residents of Holgate had petitioned the Corporation under the 1887 Act – the Corporation were bound to ensure that the Holgate area would be the first site of public allotments in York. The process of finding land suitable for the residents of Holgate and for the Corporation was relatively quick. An area of land in the area, previously used as a football pitch, which was already owned by the council, had been identified as suitable for purpose. By April 1905 the

Corporation had concluded a series of negotiations to secure this site for what was termed the Holgate Allotments. The area had been rented by the Reverend J. Topham and Mrs. Roberta

Grant Lawson, who signalled their intention to give up their tenancy so, in words of the Reverend Topham, these ‘worthy men’ could obtain allotment gardens.[[74]](#footnote-74) The Town Clerk was advised by the Corporation to advertise the availability of plots in the first public allotment garden in the local newspapers. The Clerk was subsequently inundated with requests from residents in the Holgate area asking to be considered as a tenant for the site. Some chose to use this opportunity to state their worthiness for an allotment; one individual wrote how he was retired and needed the occupation, another that he had been resident in the area for many years. Mr. Joseph Riches, in his application, drew attention to his need to provide for a large family (Figure 2). Mr. Riches, resident in the Holgate area worked as a labourer in the Scarcroft area and with seven children wanted to take on a plot at the new site in Holgate.[[75]](#footnote-75)

The site consisting of fifty-four individual plots of varying sizes over 300 square yards was laid out by the City Engineer and by January 1906 the first tenants were able to take their plots (Figure 3). The demand for allotments was so high that by September 1906 all the plots on the site had been rented. The process of selection, however, was strictly monitored with details of the occupation of tenants recorded by the Town Clerk.[[76]](#footnote-76) The yearly rent for each individual plot of 10 shillings and 6 pence also prohibited access for many of the city’s poorest residents. However, as the City Corporation opened the allotment garden to tenants, they faced a growing set of demands from plot holders to maintain and improve the site. The allotment holders had formed themselves into the Holgate Allotment Holders Association by January 1906 and proceeded to negotiate with the Corporation as to the responsibilities of the latter towards the maintenance of the allotments. The provision of water pumps, the keeping of livestock and the lowering of rent were recurring issues in the correspondence between the Corporation and the tenants.[[77]](#footnote-77) Through these actions, the tenants began to rework the relationship between citizens and the City Corporation – creating a new set of understandings, beyond the Liberal notion of an ‘organic society’, as to the use and value of allotment sites.[[78]](#footnote-78) An expectation arose from the correspondence between the allotment association and the Small Holdings and Allotment Committee that the Corporation had a duty to provide for its citizens. In March 1906 tenants successfully requested that a fence be erected along the side of the path leading to the football field which was adjacent to Holgate allotments:

‘As during the football matches held since the allotments were opened the players and followers have strayed on to the ground already dug over, and particularly on the hedge side, have stood to watch the play and trampled the soil down.’[[79]](#footnote-79)

This letter of complaint contained 47 signatures, representing nearly all the tenants of the Holgate site. In this action, tenants acted collectively to rework the terms and conditions set out by the Corporation, which was now compelled to consider its position and responsibilities as a landlord. This alteration in the relationship between the Corporation and its citizens had a substantial impact across the city. As residents witnessed the development of the Holgate site and the negotiations between the Corporation and the Holgate Allotment Holders Association a perception arose that regarded the provision of allotments as the Corporation’s duty. This manifested itself in the formation of several local allotment associations, which used the example of the Holgate site to begin petitioning the Corporation to request that allotments be made available in their areas as well. However, despite the working class activism which had secured the Holgate site for its residents, it was the Liberal ideal of self-improvement which was reinforced as the ‘proper’ function of the sites. Oscar Rowntree, brother of Benjamin Rowntree and Treasurer of the Liberal Association, writing in the Yorkshire Gazette on the 25th of August 1906 defined the three principal values of an allotment to a working man:

1) If a man puts labour into it he can add materially to his weekly wage from its produce.

2) He is always sure of a good supply of fresh vegetables.

3) The cultivation affords pleasure and healthy exercise to one who may have been cooped-up all day in some factory or other place of business. In addition his family will undoubtedly derive great benefit where they help its cultivation.[[80]](#footnote-80)

An editorial comment in the same paper also referred to the notion of ‘improvement’ that the allotment offered to working class residents of York:

‘Gardens…bring the wives and children into the scheme of recreation and it is no mean blessing to bestow to associate the whole family with the husband’s and father’s use of his leisure hours. Nothing appeals more strongly to the man than the sight of the flowers and fruits that have grown up under his own loving care; many a mother wearied by the monotony and drudgery of household cares, finds renewed health strength, and brightness while spending the cool of the evening in the midst of such delightful surroundings; and children learn early to associate their happiest hours with the soil’.[[81]](#footnote-81)

The allotment as a resource for both moral and material improvement was thereby reinforced within this Liberal ideology; as through hard labour and dedication the individual was considered to be able to reap substantial rewards.[[82]](#footnote-82)

**The Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1907**

With rising unemployment and a worsening economy, the Liberals swept to power across Britain in the Parliamentary Elections of 1906 on the promise of reform.[[83]](#footnote-83) Principal amongst the reforms set in place by the new government were the Old Age Pension Act (1908) and the Workmen’s Compensation Act (1906). A significant amount of legislation was also focused on restructuring the laws controlling the distribution of land.[[84]](#footnote-84) The Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1907 went further than any previous piece of legislation regarding land reform by stating that local authorities had a responsibility to provide land for their citizens. Section 23 provides that if local authorities:

‘…are of the opinion that there is a demand for allotments...in the borough, district or

parish the council shall provide a sufficient number of allotments to persons...resident

in the borough district or parish and desiring the same’.[[85]](#footnote-85)

In forming the opinion that there existed a demand for allotments, local authorities were obliged to take into consideration as evidence:

‘…a representation in writing by any six registered parliamentary electors or

ratepayers’.[[86]](#footnote-86)

Section 25 of the 1907 Act also gave local authorities the power to compulsorily purchase land for allotments, if land could not be acquired by private agreement. In York, the 1907 Act served to galvanise the City Corporation in its actions in providing allotment gardens and the city’s Small Holdings and Allotments Committee was formed soon after the 1907 Act was passed.[[87]](#footnote-87) Consisting of six councillors and aldermen and dominated by Liberal members, the Small Holdings and Allotment Committee sat for the first time in early January 1908 and their role at this meeting was clearly defined:

‘…the Committee report to this council as to the obligations and powers of the (1908) Act and other matters, with a view to this council delegating to the Committee such of its powers and duties as may be deemed expedient’.[[88]](#footnote-88)

The Small Holdings and Allotments Committee instructed the Town Clerk in March 1908 to advertise in the local newspapers for those interested in acquiring an allotment to make themselves known to the Committee. The residents of the South Bank area of the city were the first to respond to this advertisement requesting an allotment site in their area. The Committee, therefore, focused their attention on securing land for these citizens. This proved highly problematical as the committee soon found many land owners in the area reluctant to sell or lease land that was to be used for allotments. The Committee asked the City Engineer in July 1908 to draw up plans for a site just outside the city boundary at Bishopthorpe near South Bank, to be presented to the newly formed South Bank Allotment Holders’ Association. In August 1908 the City Engineer submitted his report:

‘The Bustardthorpe site provided 152 plots, the areas of which are for the most part ¼ rood (approx. 300 sq. yds.) sections. Of the above number of plots 31 are larger than a ¼ rood, varying from an area of 321 yards to 630 yards. Provision is made for 2 main roads 10 feet wide and 80 yards apart with five cross roads, 7 feet 6inches wide and 40 yards apart. It is proposed to make these roads with ashes only…12 stand pipes fed from the Water company’s main, with sunk tubs for the storage of water…Cost: £373-5-0’.[[89]](#footnote-89)

This proposal was dismissed by the newly formed South Bank Allotment Holders’ Association, stating that the Bishopthorpe site was too far away from local residences to be practicable.[[90]](#footnote-90) Despite this objection the Committee pushed ahead with its plans to develop the site into allotments. In September 1909 a contract was signed to lease the land for an initial period of 21 years at an annual rent of £48-12s-6d. The site, which totalled over 9 acres, was designated in the contract as being procured under the 1908 Allotment Act and specifically for the residents in South Bank (Figure 4). Correspondence stated that the land was ‘to provide Allotments under the Act of this year for the labouring classes in the South Bank District of York’.[[91]](#footnote-91)

In October 1909 the City Engineer laid out plans for the newly acquired site. To ensure the allotments were not operated at a loss the Small Holdings and Allotments Committee suggested in October 1909 that the yearly rent was to be in the region of 15 shillings for an allotment of 300 square yards. This proposal was quickly dismissed by the South Bank Allotment Holders’ Association who demanded parity with the rent charged at the Holgate site.[[92]](#footnote-92) The Committee relented but set the rent at 12 shillings and 6 pence for an allotment. Construction was completed quickly and in March 1910 the new allotments were let by ballot at the Guildhall in the city centre. Rather than the petitions from working class residents which had led to the development of the Holgate allotments, Bishopthorpe allotments were a Corporation project. Therefore, there was a great deal of interest in the use and development of the site, reinforcing the notion of the ‘cultivating’ social influence of the allotments.[[93]](#footnote-93) The Corporation encouraged and assisted the first ‘allotment show’, to exhibit the produce of tenants at Bishopthorpe allotments, which was held at the South Bank Adult School (Figure 5).[[94]](#footnote-94) The South Bank Allotment Holders’ Association was renamed two years after the allotment site was set out as the Bishopthorpe Road Association. Following the pattern of the York Cocoa Works Horticultural Society, the President was the Lord Mayor and notable York Liberals, such as Benjamin Rowntree and Arnold Rowntree were patrons.[[95]](#footnote-95) Despite the connections between the Liberal notion of allotments as ‘cultivators’ of the working classes, from the site’s beginnings the tenants of Bishopthorpe allotments followed their counterparts at Holgate allotments and used their position as tenants to gain concessions from the Corporation. It is these tacit acts which attempted to alter the relationship between the citizens and the local authority. The discussions between the Corporation’s Small Holdings and Allotments Committee and the individual tenants and collective associations of the sites reflect the new relationships that were formed through the provision of allotment gardens. There were complaints about dogs being exercised on the Bishopthorpe site, for which the committee erected a sign prohibiting dogs from the area.

There was also a continuing debate between the allotment associations and the Small Holdings and Allotments Committee regarding the provision of water pumps free of charge for the benefit of tenants. There were also discussions over whether poultry should be allowed on the Holgate site, as some tenants had already set up hen runs on their plots. Though the keeping of hens was not allowed in the tenancy agreement, the Committee eventually permitted this to continue. Significantly, allotment tenants used events such as allotment shows to highlight land access issues in the city. Tenants voiced their concerns at the ‘Bishopthorpe Road Allotment Show’ of August 1911 that access to the site was limited to the main road and the only way to get to the nearby River Ouse was through private land.[[96]](#footnote-96) The development of the Corporation allotments at Bishopthorpe and Holgate encouraged residents in other areas of the city to begin requesting allotment sites in their locality. At the outset of the First World War, the Corporation had set in plans for two further allotments in the Walmgate and Fulford Road area of the city.[[97]](#footnote-97)

However, whilst tenants and citizens reworked the relationship between themselves and the Corporation a process of control was still enacted by the Small Holdings and Allotments Committee.[[98]](#footnote-98) The first eviction of a tenant from a Corporation allotment was carried out in April 1914, as the Committee acted against a Mr. J. Berry, who owed rent and had let his allotment site go uncultivated. The Committee served notice and Mr. Berry was evicted a month later.[[99]](#footnote-99) In this manner, allotments in York substantiated the Liberal philosophy of the ‘improvement’ of society and the ‘cultivation’ of individuals as tenants were expected to improve their own physical and moral situation whilst tending to the allotment site.[[100]](#footnote-100) Certainly the provision of allotment gardens for the city was also a profitable venture for the Corporation. Whilst allotment contracts expressly forbid tenants sell produce from their plots for profit, accounts from the financial year ending in March 1913 revealed a gain of £31 6s and 9d for the Corporation.[[101]](#footnote-101) The development of the allotment gardens in the years before the First World War thereby reflected the differing values placed upon these areas of land. The allotment gardens became a site of complimentary visions for the role of the individual and the Corporation in the city. Whilst working class residents were able to cultivate land to supplement their diet and enjoy a pastime, the Corporation was able to affirm the Liberal philosophy of cultivating an ‘organic society’.

**Conclusions**

The provision of allotments in York during the first decades of the twentieth century represents the development of urban governance and the relationships between local authorities and their citizens in twentieth century Britain. Allotment gardens in the city were constructed as tools of social and civic reform, as a means of rectifying the poverty and disenfranchisement experienced by many working class citizens. The Liberal ideology of improvement and reform through ‘cultivation’, both physical and moral, was supported by the leading business in the city, Rowntree’s Cocoa Works. Under the auspices of Rowntree’s and other businesses within York, private allotments had developed in York for the benefit of their own workers. The majority of the city’s working classes were unable to gain access to this important amenity. The development of working class activism brought this issue of land reform to the fore at the beginning of the twentieth century and forced the City Corporation to undertake a responsibility to provide allotments to citizens. However, it was the Liberal notion of cultivating body and mind which dominated the development of the allotment gardens within York. However, whilst these Liberal notions served to create these public amenities the formation of allotment gardens provided working class residents with a means to petition the Corporation for greater involvement. The Corporation’s position as a landlord to allotment tenants created a new set of relationships between citizens and the civic authority.

Whilst allotment gardens have not been a significant feature in debates regarding the development of urban Britain in the twentieth century, a reconsideration of the tools of social and civic reform enables allotment sites to be examined with regard to issues of governance, identity and urban life. An assessment of urban allotments provides a means of observing the growth of interactions between citizens and local authorities, between citizens and local businesses as well as the dynamics within social and political life.[[102]](#footnote-102) In York, the development of allotment gardens was intended at the outset to reform the working classes, by providing the means by which they could elevate themselves from poverty and improve their lifestyle. However, through the construction, maintenance and development of allotment sites in the city, a shift in politics and local government practice occurred which served not only to bring cultivation into the city of York itself but significantly acted to cultivate both the city’s citizens and the City Corporation.

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101. York City Archives, Small Holdings and Allotments Committee 1908-1919. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. See Giddens, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)