

‘A garden to every cottage’: cottage gardens and the nineteenth-century agricultural labourer*

by Danae Tankard

Abstract

This article considers the economic, social and moral value attached to the gardens of agricultural labourers from c.1830 to c.1910. Its focus is southern England, with a particular emphasis on Sussex. The allotment movement gained a new impetus in the wake of the Swing Riots of 1830 but the spread of allotments across the country was extremely uneven. In Sussex they were never widespread and labourers were generally forced to rely on their gardens to help provision the household. However, garden size varied widely, with some cottages having very small gardens, and some having none at all. To encourage productive gardening agricultural and horticultural societies held annual shows, awarding cash prizes for ‘best cultivated garden’ and ‘best vegetables’, with entrants being examined for their moral probity and domestic management. For labourers, economic necessity was balanced by an enjoyment of aesthetic gardening. Flower gardens, usually located at the front, allowed labourers to display their respectability and social worth.

The quotation in the title of this article comes from a prize-winning essay by George Nicholls published in the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society* in 1846 in which the author made four recommendations for how the ‘condition’ of agricultural labourers could be improved without increasing their wages.¹ Nicholls’ fourth recommendation was that landowners should provide their labourers and cottage tenants with gardens of between a quarter and half an acre.² He outlined the benefits that would accrue from the more widespread provision of decent-sized cottage gardens: it would enable the labourer to become more self-sufficient, providing the household with ‘many little comforts’ that it would not otherwise have; it would occupy his

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¹ G. Nicholls, ‘On the condition of the agricultural labourer; with suggestions for its improvement’, *JRASE*, 7 (1846), pp. 1–30 (quote from p. 21).

² The other three recommendations were: providing more employment for agricultural labourers; improving their educational provision; improving cottages.

leisure time ‘keeping him from idle associates, and from falling into dissipated or vicious habits’; it would unite his family in a shared endeavour and instil in them a sense of pride; and it would make his small cottage appear more roomy and cheerful. In Nicholls’ view, the labourer’s cottage and garden together should become ‘a little world within which his dearest affections are centred’, keeping him happy and contented and encouraging him to believe that although his was a ‘life of labour and endurance’, he was nevertheless appreciated by his superiors.³ Nicholls, a Poor Law commissioner and an ardent supporter of the principle of ‘less eligibility’, was one of many nineteenth-century social commentators who advocated the importance of the cottage garden to the agricultural labourer, seeing its successful cultivation as a means of improving his material standard of living whilst also inculcating in him a range of positive behaviours and values.⁴ The importance of the agricultural labourer’s garden to his social and economic welfare has also been recognized by historians investigating a range of interrelated themes including labouring households’ income and survival strategies (and more broadly changes in agricultural labourers’ standards of living over the course of the nineteenth century), the gendered division of rural labour and labourers’ access to land.⁵ Despite this recognition, the subject of agricultural labourers’ gardens has received remarkably little detailed scholarly attention.⁶

This article seeks to redress this lacuna, focusing on the gardens of agricultural labourers living in Sussex but drawing too on evidence from other southern counties. Whilst acknowledging the importance of allotments, it emphasizes that in some counties, including Sussex, they were never that widespread and for the majority of labouring households gardens provided their only cultivation space. The primary purpose of allotments and gardens was of course food production for household consumption and, if possible, for sale. However, as we shall see, the contribution that home-grown produce could make was highly variable because of the uneven provision of allotments and significant variations in garden size. This article also considers the role of agricultural and horticultural shows in stimulating competitive gardening amongst agricultural labourers by offering cash prizes for well-cultivated gardens. Organized by the social elite, these competitions rewarded successful gardening and household self-sufficiency whilst also seeking to improve inter-class relations and to instil in the labouring class habits of industry and moral probity. However, labourers’ gardens were more than just productive spaces; evidence of widespread flower cultivation points to the social and aesthetic significance that gardens had to labouring households and suggests that gardening was also valued as a leisure activity rather than being seen merely as an economic necessity.

³ Nicholls, ‘Condition of the agricultural labourer’, pp. 20–3.

⁴ ODNB, ‘Nicholls, Sir George (1781–1865), poor-law reformer and administrator’ (accessed 18 Apr. 2019).

⁵ See, for example, N. Verdon, *Rural women workers in 19th-century England: gender, work and wages* (2002), ch. 6, ‘Survival strategies: women, work and the informal economy’ (see especially pp. 186–7 for a very brief discussion of labourers’ gardens); B. Reay, *Rural*

England: labouring lives in the nineteenth century (2004), ch. 4, ‘Household strategies’ (see especially pp. 75–8).

⁶ Margaret Willes provides some useful information about rural working-class gardens in *The gardens of the British working class* (2014), pp. 123–8, but her focus is mainly on the urban working class. See also K. Sayer, *Country cottages: a cultural history* (2000), ch. 3, ‘The English cottage garden’ (see esp. pp. 84–101).

I

As most nineteenth-century social commentators acknowledged, the basic problem for the agricultural labourer was his complete dependence on wages. He had no independent means of subsistence. In the 1820s and 1830s there was a substantial labour surplus, especially in the south where most agricultural labourers lived; the problems of oversupply of labour were exacerbated by the advent of mechanized threshing which meant that many rural labourers lost their winter work. In Sussex wage levels could be as low as 8s. to 9s. a week and were topped up to subsistence levels through parochially administered poor rates.⁷ The reliance of a significant number of able-bodied men on parish relief strained social relations within rural communities; farmers resented their increasingly heavy tax burden whilst labourers found their dependency humiliating and degrading.⁸ Critics of the Old Poor Law also argued that this dependency had created 'moral havoc' amongst the labouring population, destroying their industry, honesty and self-respect and encouraging an abject passivity.⁹

Various land provision schemes were established to try to ameliorate the plight of the impoverished labourer, including cow pastures, potato grounds and allotments.¹⁰ From the outset these schemes were intended to have both material and moral benefits, reducing the labourer's dependency on wages and poor relief and restoring in him a sense of pride and a belief that he had at his disposal the means to improve his and his family's lot. 1830 marked the beginning of what Jeremy Burchardt has identified as the second phase of the allotment movement, initiated in response to the widespread agricultural disturbances of that year.¹¹ One of the pioneers of this phase of the allotment movement in Sussex was Mary Ann Gilbert, the wife of Davies Gilbert, former president of the Board of Agriculture. Seeing 'independent support' as preferable to a degrading dependence on poor relief, in 1830 she established 50 allotments on wasteland to the east of Beachy Head in Eastbourne. The allotments were fenced off and entered via an iron gate on which hung a sign reading 'Here waste not time and you'll want not food'.¹² The following year a group of Sussex 'noblemen and gentlemen', which included the Duke of Norfolk, the earls of Chichester, Sheffield and Surrey and Viscount Gage, established the Sussex Association for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes, with Prince Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex, as its president. Its main purpose, according to the minutes of its first meeting, was

⁷ In 1824 weekly wages in the Chichester district were between 9s. and 10s. a week; in the Hailsham district (in the low Weald) they were 8s. a week (BPP 1825, 299, *Abstract return on practice of paying wages of labour out of poor rates*, pp. 42–3).

⁸ See R. Wells, 'Social protest, class, conflict and consciousness in the English countryside, 1700–1800', in M. Reed and R. Wells (eds), *Class, conflict and protest in the English countryside, 1700–1880* (1990), pp. 138–47.

⁹ R. Jones, *Essay on the distribution of wealth and on the sources of taxation* (1831), p. 317 (quoted in the 'Second quarterly report of the Sussex Association for

the Condition of the Labouring Classes' (1832), p. 7, East Sussex RO (hereafter ESRO), AMS 5784).

¹⁰ For an overview of these schemes see J. Burchardt, *The allotment movement in England, 1793–1873* (2002), pp. 9–47.

¹¹ Burchardt has identified three main phases in the allotment movement: a first phase lasting from c.1793 to c.1800, a second phase lasting from 1830 to the early 1850s and a third phase beginning in the 1870s (Burchardt, *Allotment movement*, pp. 9–47).

¹² A. C. Todd, 'An answer to poverty in Sussex, 1830–45', *AgHR* 4 (1956), pp. 45–51.

the amelioration of the condition of the Sussex peasantry by every practicable means, and particularly by promoting the cultivation of small allotments of land to the labourer, as the surest and readiest method of encouraging his industry, increasing his comforts and making him independent of parish relief.¹³

The Earl of Chichester practised what he preached, turning over some of his own land in the parish of Falmer to allotments.¹⁴ In western Sussex the fifth Duke of Richmond was equally active, establishing a number of allotment schemes.¹⁵ In 1832 he set aside 11 acres of land in the parish of Tangmere to provide allotments for 'industrious labourers' which were managed by the parish rector, Robert Tredcroft.¹⁶

Despite this early flurry of activity, allotments were never that widespread in Sussex or its neighbouring counties of Kent and Surrey. Burchardt has identified 32 Sussex parishes with allotment sites during the period 1830 to 1845. There were, however, approximately 270 rural (or largely rural) parishes in Sussex which means that some 240 of them had no allotment provision at all.¹⁷ The first official 'census' of allotment plots in different counties undertaken as part of the *Agricultural Returns of Great Britain for 1873* recorded 2782 allotments in Sussex, containing 519 acres, suggesting that the number of allotments might not have increased significantly after the 1830s, or had perhaps increased and then declined as was the case in Kent.¹⁸ In comparison, Wiltshire had some 15,445 allotments (4310 acres) and Northamptonshire had 16,447 allotments (4294 acres).¹⁹ The reasons for the relative scarcity of allotments in Sussex are unclear, but seem to have been due to an assumption on the part of landowners and farmers that cottage gardens were large enough to meet a labouring household's needs and that labourers neither needed nor wanted allotments. As we have seen, Nicholls recommended that labourers should be provided with gardens of between one quarter and half an acre but in Sussex what was thought to constitute a 'good' or a 'fair' garden was one containing about 20 rods of ground, the equivalent to 330 square feet (30.6 square metres) or about one eighth of an acre.²⁰ This was thought to be the maximum that one man could cultivate on his own without bringing in additional labour or exhausting him to a point where he was unable to fulfil his responsibilities to his employer.²¹ In 1867

¹³ ESRO, AMS 5784. For its prospectus see ESRO, SAS/CO 4/230/8. This organization does not seem to have been affiliated to the Labourer's Friend Society, which had been established in 1830. For a discussion of this organization and its affiliated societies see Burchardt, *Allotment movement*, pp. 51, 70–108.

¹⁴ D. Roberts, *Paternalism in early Victorian England* (1979), p. 118.

¹⁵ Roberts, *Paternalism*, p. 108.

¹⁶ West Sussex RO (hereafter WSRO), Goodwood Mss 579, fo. 440, 1435, fos. 42, 65, 82, 1438, fo. 112, 1477, fo. 400. I would like to thank Graham Claydon for sharing his transcriptions of the Tredcroft correspondence with me.

¹⁷ Burchardt, *Allotment movement*, pp. 60–1. Figures for parishes have been calculated from J. A. Vickers (ed), *The religious census of Sussex 1851* (Sussex Record

Soc. 75, 1989).

¹⁸ Burchardt, *Allotment movement*, p. 61. In his response to the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes in 1884, Alfred Simmons claimed that in Kent in the 1840s there had been some 2200 allotments but that now they 'are very scarce indeed' (BPP, 1885, C.4402, *RC on the Housing of the Working Classes*, p. 554).

¹⁹ BPP, 1873, lxi, *Agricultural Returns of Great Britain for 1873*, Appendix; Burchardt, *Allotment movement*, pp. 222–6.

²⁰ A rod or a perch is a linear measurement of about 5.5 yards or 16.5 feet.

²¹ BPP, 1867–8, 4068, *RC on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture*, App. 2, p. 161.

the assistant parliamentary commissioner the Revd James Fraser gathered information on gardens and allotments as part of his investigation into the living and working conditions of rural labourers undertaken for the Royal Commission on Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. Information for 12 of the 21 parishes making up the Horsham and Hailsham Unions (all lying within the Sussex Weald) is summarized in Table 1.²²

As we can see, only two out of 12 parishes had allotments. In the case of Ifield, allotments were no doubt intended to supplement cottage gardens (which at ten rods or less would have been considered small). Parishes where there were one or two predominant landowners were as unlikely to have allotments as those with several 'small proprietors'. Elsewhere in Sussex allotments were similarly sparse and by mid-century some earlier allotment schemes had disappeared. In 1867 there were no allotments in any of the downland and coastal parishes in the Westhampnett Union where the sixth Duke of Richmond was the predominant landowner. The Tangmere allotments, established in 1832 by the fifth Duke of Richmond, had gone; Fraser noted that 'there were some allotments 15 or 20 years ago, but they have been abandoned as unnecessary'.²³ A keen cottage builder, the sixth Duke, who had inherited the estate on his father's death in 1860, perhaps considered that the provision of adequate gardens obviated the need for allotments. In his report on the Thakeham Union made to the Royal Commission in 1892 William E. Bear recorded that across the 17 union parishes there were only 113 allotments, the equivalent of one allotment to 71.3 people. He was told by the landowners, farmers, clergymen and 'other impartial witnesses' that the lack of allotments reflected a lack of demand from labourers who 'nearly all have fair or good gardens'.²⁴

However, as Bear noted, the size of gardens in these parishes varied considerably; many were between 10 and 20 rods but some were 'very small' and others had no gardens at all. Cottages in villages were least likely to have 'good' or 'fair' gardens. In Amberley, Bear reported that 'one of the chief faults ... is the small size of many of the gardens, though very few houses are altogether without them. This is a common fault, and almost an unavoidable one in large villages'.²⁵ In the neighbouring county of Kent there were also significant variations in garden size. In his investigation into rural living conditions in the villages of Hernehill, Dunkirk and Boughton under Blean undertaken in the wake of the Hernehill Rising of 1838, Frederick Liardet noted that in Boughton under Blean many of the cottages, 'being in the street' had very small gardens and some of them were without gardens altogether. Of the 50 dwellings he observed, nine were garden-less; only three had gardens larger than 20 perches (or rods) and the remainder were 'small patches not sufficient to raise half the quantity of vegetables required by a family'. In contrast, in the neighbouring village of Hernehill gardens were relatively large (between eight and 16 perches), which allowed householders to grow a sufficient supply of

²² BPP, 1867-8, 4068, App. 2, pp. 76-86.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-98. Quote from p. 97.

²⁴ BPP, 1893-4, C.6894-I, *RC on Labour. The Agricultural Labourer, Vol. 1 England. Part I. Reports by Mr William E. Bear*, pp. 61-2. The labourers Bear questioned gave a slightly more mixed response: whilst

some expressed indifference to allotments, others said that they would be glad to have them 'but that they did not know how to go to work to obtain them' (p. 61).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59. Bear does not say what he considers a 'very small' garden to be, but presumably something smaller than 10 rods. 'Good', 'large' or 'fair' gardens appear to be those of about 20 rods.

TABLE 1. Summary of information supplied to the Revd James Fraser about cottage gardens and allotments in parishes in the Horsham and Hailsham Unions, 1867.

<i>Parish</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>Gardens</i>	<i>Allotments</i>	<i>Landowners</i>
Slinfold	Horsham	Most of these cottages have a sufficient amount of garden; in this stiff clay soil 20 rods is considered to be as much as a man can profitably cultivate.	None.	Several proprietors; 2 of chief landowners are resident.
Warnham	Horsham	All the cottages have more or less garden, from five rods to 20.	None.	3 large and a few small proprietors.
Ifield	Horsham	Few of the gardens would exceed 10 rods.	There are 2 acres of allotment, let in parcels of 10 rods each.	About 1700a belongs to one proprietor; 8 or 9 other landowners.
Rusper	Horsham	Fair piece of garden ground.	None.	8 or 10 landowners.
West Grinstead	Horsham	20 rods is considered to be an adequate size for a garden.	There are no allotments now; there were some, but the people gave them up of their own accord.	Several landowners.
Shipley	Horsham	Most of the cottages have good gardens, from 20 to 30 rods in size.	None.	2 principal landowners.
Nuthurst	Horsham	Most have sufficient gardens.	None.	4 principal landowners.
Warbleton	Hailsham	Most of the cottages, except about a score built 40 years ago, have gardens; 20 rods is considered to be a sufficient size for a garden.	There are nine acres of allotment, divided into parcels of from 20 to 40 rods apiece. The people are found anxious to have them, and the lots are very well cultivated.	Several landowners; 4 of landowners are resident.
Heathfield	Hailsham	There are no allotments, most of the cottages having fair gardens.	None.	4 principal and a great many small proprietors.
Hooe	Hailsham	Most of the cottages have gardens averaging 20 rods in size, but there are no allotments.	None.	4 or 5 large landowners, none of whom are resident, and 6 or 7 small proprietors.
Wartling	Hailsham	There are no allotments, but nearly all the cottages have gardens.	None.	2 landowners own $\frac{3}{4}$ of land; 20 or so small proprietors.
Ninfield	Hailsham	Almost all have gardens.	There are no allotments.	2 chief landowners.

Source: BPP, 1867-8, 4068, *RC on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture*, Appendix 2, pp. 76-86.

vegetables to last the year.²⁶ It is also the case that whilst it was recommended that new cottages should have at least 20 rods of land this did not always happen; Fraser was told that those recently built in the Sussex village of Barnham had ‘very little garden and very small rooms’.²⁷

II

The primary *material* benefits to the rural working class of a garden or an allotment were the provision of food for the household and the opportunity to enhance household income by selling surplus produce. Successive parliamentary reports on the condition of the agricultural labourer made reference to the poverty of his household’s diet, the result of restricted budgets, poor shopping facilities and the housewife’s apparent inability to cook.²⁸ In 1864 a report was published on the diet of the poorer labouring classes in England which gave examples of a typical daily diet for agricultural labourers in different counties. In Sussex a labouring family consumed tea, bread, butter or cheese for breakfast; for dinner (lunch, the main meal of the day) they ate a little meat, vegetables, cheese or butter and bread daily but they cooked only once or twice a week; supper was bread and butter.²⁹ Information was taken from two Sussex families, family ‘D’ and family ‘W’, both living in the parish of Horsham. Family ‘D’ with 10 members consumed 1 lb of peas and 7 lbs of potatoes a week, but no other vegetables; family ‘W’ with 7 members consumed 14 lbs of potatoes but no other vegetables. The report’s author does not record whether the peas and potatoes consumed by these families were home grown. Neither household had an allotment; neither had a pig.³⁰

Much of what labourers ate was shop-bought.³¹ Their restricted budgets and rural isolation meant that they were largely dependent on the village shop where prices could be as much as 25 per cent higher than in town shops and where the ready extension of credit ensured their continued custom. In some villages in the north-east of Sussex labourers were paid in cheques which could be redeemed only at the village shop giving them no choice but to buy their goods there.³² The prices charged for vegetables in village shops made them unaffordable to many labouring households.³³ Heavy dependency on bread meant that labouring families were particularly vulnerable during periods of high wheat prices.³⁴ During the 1840s, when the price

²⁶ F. Liardet, ‘State of the peasantry in the county of Kent’, *Central Society of Education* (1839), pp. 99–100, 120, 122. For an analysis of the Hernehill Rising see B. Reay, *The last rising of the agricultural labourers* (1990); for a microstudy of these three villages see Reay, *Microhistories: demography, society and culture in rural England, 1800–1930* (1996).

²⁷ BPP, 1867–8, 4068, App. 2, p. 160.

²⁸ For a discussion of nineteenth-century agricultural labourers’ diets, J. Burnett, *Plenty and want: a social history of diet in England from 1815 to the present day* (1979), pp. 30–47; 149–76.

²⁹ BPP, 1864, 3416, *Sixth Report of the Medical Officer of the Privy Council*, App. 6, p. 259.

³⁰ BPP, 1864, 3416, App. 6, pp. 312–14.

³¹ In 1864 it was estimated that nationally 30% of labouring households bought all of their bread and a further 50% bought at least some of their bread (BPP, 1864, 3416, p. 239).

³² BPP, 1843, 510, *Reports of the Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, pp. 141–2.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁴ It has been estimated that in the first half of the nineteenth century 75% of family income was spent on food and 71% of that was spending on bread (55.5% of all income) – see E. Griffin, ‘Diets, hunger and living standards during the British Industrial Revolution’, *Past and Present* 239 (2018), p. 13.

of a half-gallon loaf of wheaten bread had reached 1s. 2d. Sussex labourers ate ‘crammings’, a kind of pudding made out of flour residue, bean porridge which supposedly made your insides feel like they were on fire, or ‘growy bread’ which was so heavy and doughy that you could pull long strings of it out of your mouth. Nevertheless they remained hungry: looking back on his life during the ‘hungry forties’, Heyshott labourer George Pollard remembered ‘we wor nigh starved sometimes’.³⁵

Productive gardening had the potential to reduce labourers’ dependency on shop-bought goods and provide the household with potatoes as an alternative carbohydrate source to bread. A witness to the 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor* claimed that he had known children of ten or 11 years old who had never tasted a vegetable until their father acquired an allotment.³⁶ Labouring women’s cooking skills were supposedly also enhanced by having a regular supply of vegetables; according to one local farmer, these skills had been lost because for so many years labouring households had eaten little but shop-bought bread, butter and cheese.³⁷ In addition to home-grown produce (including home-produced pork and eggs), labourers’ diets could be supplemented by wild foods such as berries and mushrooms, the occasional poached or gifted rabbit and, for those living in coastal villages, fish and shellfish.³⁸ Despite these additions diets remained highly restricted in terms of choice and were often deficient in both calories and nutrients.³⁹

As Emma Griffin has observed, it is difficult to estimate the contribution that garden and allotment produce made to household diets as this kind of information was seldom recorded by social investigators.⁴⁰ However, Benjamin Rowntree and May Kendall did collect it for each of the 42 households they surveyed between August 1912 and March 1913, and included it in their report *How the labourer lives: a study of the rural labour problem*, published in 1913, although they seldom recorded the size of the garden or allotment.⁴¹ The amount of garden produce consumed in these households in a single week varied significantly from nothing to 25 per cent but overall the authors estimated that it constituted less than one twelfth (8.33 per cent) of the food that they consumed. Moreover, as they noted, garden produce was not available all year round. Supplies of potatoes had usually run out by December or January,

³⁵ T. Fisher Unwin, *The hungry forties: life under the bread tax* (1904), pp. 17–54. A half-gallon loaf weighed approximately 4lb 5oz. A basic bread ration for one adult was approximately one pound of bread a day. ‘Crammings’ were made out of what was left over after the flour and bran had been taken away, mixed with a bit of bread flour. It was usually made into a kind of pudding (p. 22). For the description of ‘growy bread’ and bean porridge see p. 29. Quote from p. 38. Wages in the Midhurst district of Sussex in the 1840s were 9s. a week. See also Burnett, *Plenty and want*, pp. 40–1.

³⁶ Cited in BPP, 1843, 510, p. 37.

³⁷ BPP, 1843, 510, p. 143

³⁸ Verdon, *Rural women workers*, pp. 181–2.

³⁹ I. Gazeley and S. Horrell, ‘Nutrition in the English agricultural labourer’s household over the course of the long nineteenth century’, *EcHR* 66 (2013), pp. 757–84.

⁴⁰ Griffin, ‘Diets, hunger and living standards’, p. 19. For their study of agricultural labourers’ nutrition Gazeley and Horrell assumed that a garden (of unknown size) could provide 35 lbs of potatoes per week (allowing 1 lb of potatoes per person for a family of five) and 3 lbs of vegetables (‘Nutrition in the English agricultural labourer’s household’, App. 1). I would like to thank Sara Horrell for providing me with the appendices which were not accessible online.

⁴¹ B. S. Rowntree and M. Kendall, *How the labourer lives: a study of the rural labour problem* (1913). The households were spread across seven counties: Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Bedfordshire, Essex, Leicestershire, North and West Yorkshire. Only respectable families were chosen for investigation and families with ‘an abnormally large’ number of children were excluded (p. 38).

forcing households to buy more or to replace them with shop-bought bread at a time of the year when household budgets were already stretched by lower winter wages and the increased costs of fuel.⁴²

Whilst none of the labourers' wives that Rowntree and Kendall spoke to complained of hunger, one did observe that after their meals her family were never 'completely satisfied like', except on Sundays.⁴³ Others complained about the tedium of their daily diets: when asked whether she enjoyed her food Mrs Dewhurst replied 'bread and margarine and potatoes – that is what it is', adding 'I sometimes think I'd like to sit down and have a real proper dinner'.⁴⁴ Rowntree and Kendall's conclusions were that in the households they surveyed, despite the important contribution made by home-grown produce, diets were not just tedious but nutritionally inadequate, with women and children most likely to be underfed.⁴⁵

Similar problems occur when trying to quantify the amount of income a household could potentially generate from the sale of surplus garden and allotment produce. Burchardt has estimated that in the second quarter of the nineteenth century an allotment of a quarter of an acre with no pig kept on it would increase annual income by 11 per cent, and with a pig by between 15 per cent and 21 per cent. He suggests that the significance of allotments to household economies had probably declined by the end of the nineteenth century as food prices fell and family incomes rose.⁴⁶ A Board of Trade report of 1907 estimated that the gross annual value of the produce of a garden or an allotment of up to a quarter of an acre in size was between 25s. and £5, with fruit from 'well-established' fruit trees being worth from £1 to £2 per year.⁴⁷ In 1892, whilst carrying out an investigation for the Royal Commission on Labour, William E. Bear was told that in Thakeham sales of garden fruit were more than sufficient to pay household rents.⁴⁸ However, it is noticeable that of the households surveyed by Rowntree and Kendall very few had any surplus produce to sell. One Essex household was able to sell vegetables from its 'excellent' garden; another in Oxfordshire had sold corn grown on their allotment that year for 16s. 6d. In both cases the profits were put towards paying their rent.⁴⁹ As we have seen, most labouring households in Sussex did not have access to allotments and few had gardens bigger than one-eighth of an acre, making it unlikely that there was much in the way of surplus produce to sell.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 74, 110, 306–7.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 240.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 50. Mrs Dewhurst was married to an agricultural labourer earning 12s. a week. They had two sons, aged 3 years and 6 months, and three daughters, aged 6, 4½ and 2. They rented an allotment for 1d. per week. 25% of the food they consumed was home produce.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 299–309; Burnett, *Plenty and want*, pp. 174–6. For a discussion of the unequal distribution of food within the household, see Verdon, *Rural women workers*, p. 172.

⁴⁶ Burchardt, *Allotment movement*, pp. 160–4.

⁴⁷ Cited in F. G. Heath, *British rural life and labour* (1911), p. 61.

⁴⁸ BPP, 1893–4, C.6894-I, *Reports by Mr William E. Bear*, p. 59. Rents varied widely across the district, from as low as 1s. per week on farms to as much as 3s. 6d. a week in village centres. The average annual income of an 'ordinary' labourer was estimated at £45 5s. 4d. (pp. 60, 69).

⁴⁹ Rowntree and Kendall, *How the labourer lives*, pp. 86, 261–2.

III

In *Old West Surrey*, first published in 1904, the garden designer Gertrude Jekyll described ‘cottage folk’ as ‘great lovers of flowers’, with even the tiniest cottage gardens crammed with plants providing a visual feast for passers-by (Figure 1).⁵⁰ In contrast, in 1913 Rowntree and Kendall noted that in the gardens of the cottages they surveyed ‘the old fashioned flowers which we associated with village life had apparently, to a very great extent, yielded precedence to potatoes’. Moreover, few cottages had roses growing around the porch because ‘in the first place there were no porches, and in the second no one would ever have time or patience to make roses climb about them.’⁵¹ So whose account is the more accurate, that of the unashamedly sentimentalist Gertrude Jekyll or that of experienced social investigators Rowntree and Kendall? In fact, evidence from a range of sources suggests that many rural labourers were keen flower gardeners. As we have seen, in his investigation into the living conditions of the rural working class in three Kent villages, Frederick Liardet noted how many of the households he surveyed had gardens. He also recorded the state of their cultivation and the number of them which included flowers.⁵² The results of his findings are summarized in Table 2.

Liardet found that 59 out of 142, or just over 40 per cent, of gardens contained flowers. Liardet provided no information about the appearance of these flower gardens, the range of flowers that were being grown or whether they were located to the front or the back of the cottage. Other sources suggest that flowers were more likely to be grown in the front garden, whilst vegetables and fruit trees were grown in the back garden (where there was one), which was also the usual location of the privy, the pigsty and the household refuse dump.⁵³ For example, in his report of 1893 on cottage accommodation in the Thakeham Union, Bear noted that the best cottages in the district were those built in Stopham by Sir Walter Barttelot; these were ‘well-constructed of stone, and commodious, and most of them have pretty flower gardens in front and kitchen gardens well stocked with fruit trees behind’.⁵⁴ In southern England, according to Gertrude Jekyll, ‘the most usual form of the cottage flower-garden is a strip on each side of the path leading from the road to the cottage door’; Flora Thompson noted that in the Oxfordshire hamlet of Lark Rise (or Juniper Hill) in the 1880s ‘most of the houses had at least a narrow border beside the pathway’.⁵⁵ In her village women did not work in vegetable gardens or on allotments but the ‘Victorian code’ which viewed women’s outdoor work as ‘unwomanly’ nevertheless permitted them to work in the flower garden.⁵⁶ According to Thompson the maintenance of a flower garden cost the household little other than time as plants could be grown from harvested seeds, roots and cuttings.⁵⁷

For Liardet, the presence of a flower garden was worthy of comment because there was a direct link between flower cultivation and domestic comfort; or, in his words, ‘the cottages

⁵⁰ G. Jekyll, *Old West Surrey: some notes and memories* (1904), p. 268.

⁵¹ Rowntree and Kendall, *How the labourer lives*, p. 329.

⁵² Liardet, ‘State of the peasantry’, pp. 101–2, 117, 120.

⁵³ F. Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* ([*Lark Rise* first published 1939] 2008), pp. 23, 24.

⁵⁴ BPP, 1893, C.6894-I, *Reports by Mr William E. Bear*, p. 59.

⁵⁵ Jekyll, *Old West Surrey*, p. 268; Thompson, *Lark Rise*, p. 115.

⁵⁶ Thompson, *Lark Rise*, pp. 114–5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

TABLE 2. Summary of information about cottage gardens in Hernehill, Dunkirk and Boughton under Blean, 1839

<i>Village</i>	<i>Number of households surveyed</i>	<i>Number of these with gardens</i>	<i>Number of these with well-cultivated gardens</i>	<i>Number of gardens in which flowers are cultivated</i>
Hernehill	51	51	48	30
Dunkirk	50	50	40	8
Boughton under Blean	50	41	37	21
Total	151	142	125	59

Source: F. Liardet, 'State of the peasantry in the county of Kent', *Central Society of Education* (1839), pp. 101–2, 117, 120.



FIGURE 1. 'Cottagers and their pot plants', original photograph from Gertrude Jekyll, *Old West Surrey: some notes and memories* (1904), Surrey History Centre, 6521/2/2/287. Reproduced by permission of the Surrey History Centre.

of the cultivators of flowers generally exhibited greater proofs of comfort and cleanliness than those of others'.⁵⁸ Writing a few years later George Nicholls observed that it was important that labourers taught their children how to grow flowers so that as adults these skills would 'exercise an ameliorating influence upon their character and pursuits'.⁵⁹ Many labouring households of course were well aware of the importance of showing a respectable face to the world, despite their poverty. Thompson recalled the pride of the hamlet's housewives in being able to offer refreshments to an unexpected guest, a cup of tea or perhaps a glass of homemade wine: "You don't want to be poor and look poor, too" they would say; and "We've got our pride. Yes, we've got our pride".⁶⁰ A blooming flower garden, therefore, might serve as an 'invisible character reference' and as a way of 'broadcasting and establishing one's social worth'.⁶¹ It must also have provided considerable aesthetic enjoyment to a social group dismissed by Richard Jefferies as lacking 'poetical feeling' and having 'no appreciation of beauty'.⁶²

However, many social commentators noted the disparity between the beauty of a cottage's exterior and the misery of its interior. In *The English peasantry* (1874) Francis Heath described his visit to a row of cottages in a Somerset hamlet in 1873. Their external appearance was idyllic: the cottages were creeper-bound and their front gardens were full of fruit trees, flowers, shrubs and vegetables; 'rustic' beehives were scattered around the gardens and the cottages' walls were almost entirely hidden by trailing plants and shrubs. At first sight these were, Heath noted, 'the cottage homes of England' described by the poet Felicia Hemans.⁶³ However, on entering one of the cottages he discovered a family of eight living in abject poverty and squalor. There was 'one wretched little downstairs room' in which four of the five children – a group of 'ragged little creatures' – were assembled.⁶⁴ Upstairs in one of the two tiny bedrooms he encountered the husband's 93-year old bedridden mother. Both bedrooms were lit only by a single small window, and the one in the second bedroom was missing several panes of glass which the landlord refused to replace because it was the tenant's responsibility. The cottage's only garden was the small space at the front although the tenant also rented 'a few yards of potato ground' elsewhere.⁶⁵ Trade unionist Joseph Arch described these outwardly picturesque cottages, covered with ivy and climbing roses without but 'undrained and unclean within' as 'garnished hovels'; Richard Jefferies noted that in summer time a cottage might achieve 'something of that Arcadian beauty which is supposed to prevail in this country' but in winter when much of the foliage had died back the same cottage – 'the wretched place' – looked 'not unlike a dunghill'.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Liardet, 'State of the peasantry', p. 102.

⁵⁹ Nicholls, 'Condition of the agricultural labourer', p. 22.

⁶⁰ Thompson, *Lark Rise*, p. 118.

⁶¹ P. Johnson, 'Conspicuous consumption and working-class culture in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *Trans. Royal Historical Soc.*, 38 (1988), pp. 36, 40.

⁶² R. Jefferies, *The toilers of the field* ([1892] 1981), p. 75.

⁶³ In her poem 'The homes of England' (1827), pr. in *The poetical works of Mrs Felicia Hemans: complete in one volume with a critical preface* (1836), p. 318.

⁶⁴ The oldest boy, aged 9½, was working as a farm labourer.

⁶⁵ F. G. Heath, *The English peasantry* (1874), pp. 105–9.

⁶⁶ F. E. Warwick (ed.), *Joseph Arch: the story of his life told by himself* (1898), p. 44; Jefferies, *Toilers of the field*, pp. 59, 69.



FIGURE 2. Thatched cottage, Balcombe (West Sussex), c.1900, PP/WSL/PC001054, West Sussex County Council Library Service www.westsussexpast.org.uk

IV

One of the ways in which members of the social elite sought to encourage the agricultural labourer to help himself through productive gardening was by offering him the chance to compete for cash prizes at agricultural and horticultural shows. By 1836 the East Sussex Agricultural Association (established in 1831 as the Sussex Association for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes) was holding annual shows to reward industrious and ‘moral’ agricultural labourers.⁶⁷ Winners were given printed certificates presented in varnished oak frames and a cash prize.⁶⁸ In the same year the West Sussex Agricultural Association and the Arundel and Bramber Agricultural Association were established, almost certainly in response to an upsurge in rural unrest in the wake of the implementation of the New Poor Law Act the previous year.⁶⁹ As with the East Sussex Association, their primary sponsors were

⁶⁷ *The Farmer’s Magazine* 5 (1836), pp. 23–4.

⁶⁸ *Labourer’s Friend Magazine* 8 (1837), p. 25.

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the West Sussex Agricultural Association see M. Walford, ‘Rewarding “The Respectables” – shaping the future?: 19th-century agricultural associations in Hampshire and West Sussex’, *Hampshire Stud.* 65 (2010), pp. 202–23. The WSAA held its

final meeting in 1864. Walford attributes the decline of the Association to a lack support for it after the death of the 5th Duke of Richmond in 1860 (Walford, ‘Rewarding “The Respectables”’, p. 217); R. Wells, ‘Resistance to the New Poor Law in the rural south’, in J. Rule and R. Wells (eds.), *Crime, protest and popular politics in southern England, 1740–1850* (1997), pp. 91–126.

members of the rural elite, the Duke of Richmond and the Earl of Surrey, but neither set out to promote or to establish allotments, focusing instead on their annual competitions. Like the East Sussex Association, they also sought to improve class relations; the full title of the Arundel and Bramber Agricultural Association was ‘The Arundel and Bramber Agricultural Association for the encouragement of industrious cottagers, labourers and servants, and for promoting harmony and good feeling amongst the classes of society’.⁷⁰

Those wishing to enter one of the competition categories needed to provide a certificate of character signed by their employer, the local minister and a churchwarden. The former was required to certify that the candidate was a good employee, the latter that he or she was of good character (Figure 3).⁷¹ For the West Sussex Agricultural Association competition categories included: labourers who had brought up the largest families respectably, with the smallest amount of parochial relief; labourers or widows whose daughters had been placed out at respectable service at an early age and who had remained in service with good characters and whose families had (by their own industry) the greatest improvement in their condition in life; single labourers who had been in service the longest period and who had voluntarily afforded the most material aid or support for their relatives; cottagers who had the greatest number of bee stalls; cottagers whose cottages and gardens of not more than half an acre were kept and cultivated in the neatest manner. The last category was open only to those who had put their daughters out into service at an appropriate age. From 1859 the judges were also required to satisfy themselves that candidates in the cottages and gardens category had tried – so far as possible – to maintain standards of decency in their homes by ensuring that they, their sons, and their daughters, had separate bedrooms and that no bedrooms that could have been used to accommodate household members had been let to lodgers.⁷²

The Duke of Richmond encouraged prize winners to hang their certificates on their cottage walls where they could remind those who saw them of the rewards of virtue.⁷³ No doubt more useful to the labourers were the cash prizes: those winning first prize at the West Sussex show in the cottages and gardens category received £1 10s., the equivalent to approximately three weeks’ wages for an ordinary agricultural labourer.⁷⁴ Prizes and certificates were given out at a dinner attended by members of the association, including its president, the Duke of Richmond, invited guests and competition entrants.⁷⁵ This display of social egalitarianism was an important function of the competition: as the Duke of Richmond said ‘you showed a better example, and let it appear that you are not ashamed to see them sit down to dinner with you, and the labourers have experienced great gratification for it’.⁷⁶ Richmond did not, of course, go so far as to sit next to his labourers who were seated at the other end of the

⁷⁰ *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, 1 Feb. 1836.

⁷¹ WSRO, MP 1122.

⁷² WSRO, MP 5528.

⁷³ Roberts, *Paternalism*, p. 114.

⁷⁴ Wages in the Chichester district in 1848 were 12s. a week (BPP, 1850, 1152, *Settlement and poor removal: Reports to the Poor Law Board*, p. 89).

⁷⁵ Guests at the dinner held in 1846 included the Earl of Chichester, the Bishop of Chichester and East Somerset conservative MP, William Miles (Roberts, *Paternalism*, p. 107).

⁷⁶ *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, 13 Sept. 1841, cited in Walford, ‘Rewarding “The Respectables”’, p. 216.

Candidate's Notice of Competition.

I _____ Residing in the Parish
of _____ in the Rape of _____
and being _____ years of age, beg to give Notice of my intention to com-
pete for a Premium to be awarded for _____ at the
Meeting of the Arundel and Bramber Agricultural Association, which is to
take place at _____ on _____ 1840.

Dated this _____ day of _____

MASTER OR MISTRESS'S CERTIFICATE.

I _____ of _____
in the Rape of _____ do hereby certify that
* _____ has worked for me, or on the
Farm I now occupy, _____ years without intermission, and during that
time has conducted † _____ to my satisfaction.

Dated this _____ day of _____

CERTIFICATE OF GENERAL GOOD CONDUCT.

WE, the undersigned, do hereby certify, that
Labourer, (or servant) of this Parish, is to the best of our knowledge and belief,
" A regular attendant at Divine Worship.
" Not one of those who waste their Time and Money, while they corrupt their morals in
Beer Shops and Public Houses.
" That _____ general conduct is good, and such as renders _____ a fit subject for
an honorable Reward and Distinction.

Dated this _____ day of _____

" If the Minister has reason to believe that any applicant for his signature to this certi-
ficate has unduly and improperly encouraged his daughters at home, they having health
and strength for service, The Society will be obliged to the Minister to refuse in
such case to sign the certificate."

Minister. _____ Churchwarden.

* This blank space is to be filled up by the name of the candidate, and the words married or
single man or woman (as the case may be).
† This space is to be filled up by the word himself or herself (as the case may be) and any ob-
servations in explanation may be written on the back hereof.

FIGURE 3. Arundel and Bramber
Agricultural Association, proforma
certificate of character, 1840,
West Sussex Record Office, MP 1122.
Reproduced with the permission of the
West Sussex Record Office.

hall. As David Roberts has noted, in these events 'one found a microcosm of that hierarchical and patriarchal society that dominated Sussex'. In addition to their certificates, prizes and free dinner, the labourers who attended were obliged to listen to 'sermons on the iniquity of indolence, wasteful extravagance, improvidence, and beer shops'.⁷⁷

Lists of prize winners published in the local newspaper show that the same men won prizes in successive years.⁷⁸ For example William Steer, an agricultural labourer living in the coastal village of West Wittering, won first or second prize in the 'cottages and gardens' category in 1851, 1852, 1853, 1854, 1855 and 1856, receiving a total of £8 over this period.⁷⁹ This extra

⁷⁷ Roberts, *Paternalism*, pp. 107, 109.

⁷⁸ These have been collated and transcribed by Malcolm Walford (WSRO, MP 5528).

⁷⁹ In 1863 a new eligibility criterion was introduced which precluded entrants who had won £6 in this class in previous years.

income would have made a significant difference to Steer's family: the 1851 Census records that in addition to himself and his wife, he had four children living at home with him, aged between one and ten.⁸⁰ At this time he also had two male lodgers, both agricultural labourers, their presence suggesting that the household struggled to make ends meet. Moreover, his cottage is likely to have been severely overcrowded: in his report on cottage accommodation in West Wittering in 1867 the Revd James Fraser noted that there were insufficient cottages in the parish and that most had two bedrooms, some had only one and very few had three. The shortage of accommodation also meant that rents in West Wittering were high.⁸¹ Steer was nevertheless fortunate to have what would have been deemed a 'good' sized garden of 41 perches (approximately a quarter of an acre).⁸²

The use of cottage garden competitions to stimulate productive gardening, reward industry and self-help and improve inter-class relations was also a feature of nineteenth-century horticultural shows.⁸³ Probably the earliest horticultural society in Sussex was the Ditchling Horticultural Society, established in 1824, and which held its annual show in July or August.⁸⁴ Its founder was Thomas Attree, a wealthy Brighton-based solicitor and lord of the manor of Ditchling Garden.⁸⁵ The Society's purpose, as reported in the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* in 1834, was 'the improvement of cottage gardening and drawing the attention of the labourers to the many advantages and comforts to be derived from the proper management arising from the smallest piece of land'.⁸⁶ Cottagers wishing to compete in the show had to be members of the Ditchling Cottagers' Society, for which they paid an annual membership fee of 3d.⁸⁷ In addition to prizes for 'best cultivated garden' and 'best vegetables', prizes were given to male and female servants for length of service; for the best management of pigs, bees and poultry; 'for general habits of industry, economy and cleanliness apparent in cottages' and for heads of household who had brought up the largest family with the least assistance from the parish.⁸⁸ Gardens and cottages were inspected prior to the annual show and a report submitted to the judging panel. Only the report submitted in 1843 survives: its contents are set out in Table 3.⁸⁹

As well as providing useful details of the range of vegetables that some cottagers were growing and which households kept pigs and bees, the report also shows the importance the Society attached to good domestic management. Members of its committee could congratulate themselves that the Society – or more specifically the spirit of competition engendered by its annual show – had improved more than garden cultivation: in the same year they reported with satisfaction that they had found 'the gardens in general under much better management

⁸⁰ TNA, HO 107/1652, p. 25, no. 108.

⁸¹ BPP, 1867–8, 4068, App. 2, p. 92. Rents ranged from £2 12s. to £6 10s. per annum, the latter being beyond the means of an agricultural labourer.

⁸² WSRO, TD W147.

⁸³ For the background to the nineteenth-century horticultural show see B. Elliott, 'Flower shows in nineteenth-century Britain', *Garden Hist.* 29 (2001), pp. 171–84.

⁸⁴ The first minute book covers the period 1831–1845

(ESRO, ACC 11108/4/1/1). For the history of the Ditchling Horticultural Society see R. Morley, *Red roughs and copper kettles: a history of the Ditchling Horticultural Society* (1990).

⁸⁵ Morley, *Red roughs*, p. 12.

⁸⁶ *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 14 July 1834 (cited in Morley, *Red roughs*, p. 20).

⁸⁷ ESRO, ACC 11108/4/4/2.

⁸⁸ ESRO, ACC 11108/4/1/1.

⁸⁹ ESRO, ACC 11108/4/10/1.

TABLE 3. Report of the cottages and gardens of Ditchling looked over by Mr Leach of Hurst[pierpoint] on 20 July 1843

William Marten	Garden well cropped with peas, beans, onions and potatoes, soil stiff, cottage very clean, 6 children.
Henry Waller	Garden well cropped, cottage very clean, soil stiff.
Thomas Scrase	Garden well cropped, cottage clean, soil stiff, a faggot stack.
William Simmons	Garden clean cropped with potatoes, turnips, beans, onions and French beans, 3 hives of bees, cottage clean.
William Pellett	One pig, cottage, clean, no garden.
Thomas Helmsley	Garden well cropped, cottage clean, pig.
William Steven's widow	Cottage clean, left with 7 children.
John Hallett	Garden well cropped, cottage clean.
Sarah Mitchell	Cottage very clean. No garden.
Thomas Mitchell	Cottage clean.
James Barrett	Good garden, well cropped, one pig, cottage clean, 3 children.
Richard Hallett	Garden well cropped with potatoes, peas, onions, house and French beans and cabbage, a very fine flower garden, 2 good pigs, cottage clean.
George Brooker	Good garden, well cropped, 2 good pigs.
James Helmsley	Good garden, well cropped, one good pig, cottage clean, 7 children.
Thomas Chambers	Garden well cropped, cottage clean, 7 children.
Jonathan Stevens	Good garden, well cropped, cottage clean, 4 children.
George Helmsley	Good garden, well cropped, cottage clean, 6 children.
William Slater	Garden well cropped with peas, beans, French beans, onions and cabbage, 13 hives of bees, 2 pigs, a faggot stack, cottage clean.
John Brookes	Garden well cropped, cottage clean.

Source: East Sussex Record Office, ACC 11108/4/10/1.

than they had anticipated, more cleanliness and comfort in the dwellings, and in some instances of cottage economy, such as a well-furnished fuel stack, a good hog or two in the pound, the collection and use of manures well attended to and in one or more instances the superior management of bees'.⁹⁰

As we saw with the West Sussex Agricultural Association, the same men won prizes at successive shows. For example, in 1847 agricultural labourer Jonathan Stevens won second prize (2s.) for best spring-sown onions, the following year he won second prize (2s.) for his spring-sown onions, second prize (2s.) for best long carrots, and in 1849 (a particularly good year for him) he won first prize (2s.) for heaviest bunch of red currants, first prize (2s. 6d.) for best spring-sown onions, first prize (2s. 6d.) for best autumn-sown onions (2s. 6d.), first and third prize (2s. 6d. and 1s.) for best turnips and a copper tea kettle for 'best tray of vegetables

⁹⁰ Cited in Morley, *Red roughs*, p. 25.

of six sorts', bringing his cash winnings for that show to 13s. which was 1s. 6d. more than the weekly agricultural wage in Ditchling at this date.⁹¹

By the late nineteenth century the link between behavioural regulation and competition eligibility had become less overt but garden shows remained a means by which the principles of self-help and positive inter-class relations could be reinforced. Prizes for cottage cleanliness had disappeared and new competition categories for 'works of industry' had been introduced, the latter part of a national movement which sought to encourage the practice of craft skills amongst the working classes as a means of practical self-help and to encourage industry, creativity and self-expression.⁹² The 1884 annual garden show of the Pulborough, Stopham and Fittleworth Cottagers' Society, for example, included categories for needlework and knitting, ironing, drawing, model-making and pressed flower designs, as well as 'strongest straw skep of bees', 'plate of new honey in combs' and 'best three-quarters loaves of homemade bread'.⁹³ In his speech at that year's show Sir Walter Barttelot, conservative MP for West Sussex, expressed his pleasure in 'seeing the people endeavouring to help themselves'. He was also keen to point out that all those attending the Show 'met there upon common ground' and expressed the hope that 'nothing would occur to separate class from class'. To those agricultural labourers who were about to gain the franchise (the Representation of the People Act, which extended the franchise to many agricultural labourers, received royal assent in December of that year), he said that they should 'do their best with it, not in the interest of any one class, but take a broad view of it and so use it for the common good of all, as every class should be maintained'. Barttelot's speech was received with cheers; some of those who heard it may have been less enthusiastic had they known that he had voted against the reform bill during its passage through parliament.⁹⁴

The village horticultural, or flower, show also became part of the repackaging of rural leisure, mediated by the Anglican church and the local elite, which took place throughout the nineteenth century and which is perhaps best illustrated by the reinvention of the 'harvest home' as the 'harvest festival' in the 1850s and 1860s.⁹⁵ As well as trying to teach the labourer that drunkenness was not a prerequisite for enjoyment, these new forms of rural leisure were an attempt to wean him from his taste for blood sports. A report in the *Cottage gardener* in 1848 celebrated the success of a horticultural show held in the Northumberland village of Etal, previously 'one of the most wicked places that could be found', where men had enjoyed participating in cock- and dog-fighting and even 'man fighting' whilst 'giving utterance to the most horrid imprecations and blasphemy'. These same men were now amongst the principal exhibitors at the garden show and were noted for their 'Christian bearing and industrial habits';

⁹¹ ESRO, ACC 11108/4/3. In 1848 an agricultural labourer in Ditchling would have received 11s. 6d. a week as a standing wage (BPP, 1850, 1152, p. 89).

⁹² A. Anderson, 'Victorian high society and social duty: the promotion of "recreative learning and voluntary teaching"', *History and Education* 31 (2002), pp. 311–34.

⁹³ *Horsham Advertiser*, 27 Sept. 1884.

⁹⁴ *Horsham Advertiser*, 27 Sept. 1884. Barttelot stood

with the leader of the Conservative party, Sir Stafford Northcote, in opposing the passage of the Reform Bill. I would like to thank Robin Eagles and Philip Salmon of the History of Parliament Trust for providing me with information about Barttelot's voting patterns during the passage of the bill.

⁹⁵ B. Bushaway, *By rite: custom, ceremony and community in England, 1700–1880* (1982), pp. 238–79.

their formerly barren gardens were filled with flowers and vegetables, their cottages were freshly white-washed.⁹⁶ By the 1860s village garden shows offered their visitors a variety of entertainments, besides the exhibits themselves, catering for all ages and both genders. Games on offer at the 1861 Ditchling Horticultural Show (disrupted by heavy rain) included women's stool ball, racing, bran dipping and pole climbing. Boys making it to the top of the pole won 'the ingredients for a good dinner' that were attached there. Two hundred local school children were treated to plum cake and wine-in-water and later on there was dancing to a full band, tea and sweets in one of the cottages and syllabus at Thomas Attree's dairy.⁹⁷ Brass bands and dancing were regular features of garden shows in the 1880s: in 1884 the Pulborough, Stopham and Fittleworth Show hosted the band of the Royal Sussex Militia whilst at the 1887 Ashtead Show in Surrey the King's Yeomanry Band played a selection of music through the afternoon and evening.⁹⁸

Flora Thompson observed that in her village women did not work in vegetable gardens or on allotments and the dominance of men as prize winners in the vegetable categories at garden shows suggests that productive gardening was seen as a male activity.⁹⁹ This is also indicated by the way in which technical education classes were promoted in the late nineteenth century. By the early 1890s some rural parishes offered their working-class men gardening classes, subsidized by the newly created county councils.¹⁰⁰ In the parish of Fittleworth, cottage gardening classes for 'young men or lads' began in February 1892, although it was noted the following month that these had not so far been well attended. In contrast, women and girls were offered classes on cookery and home dressmaking.¹⁰¹ The same gendered pattern of technical education can also be seen in other parishes. In Ashtead in Surrey for example, evening classes for men in horticulture were run during the winter months from 1891; for women and girls there were classes in dressmaking, domestic economy and nursing. 'Those for whom the classes were chiefly intended' did not always appreciate the efforts of their social betters to educate them, however. In 1897 technical classes in Ashtead were stopped because of low attendance and what the parish magazine described as 'a lamentable lack of enthusiasm'.¹⁰² Many working-class men may have preferred to discuss gardening in a more informal and socially equal setting: George Sturt recorded that in the village of Farnham in Surrey during the month of March 'gardening talk [is] the staple conversation in the village, and the public house is the club room where the discussions take place, the times being Saturday night and Sunday'. Attendance was essential for the keen gardener: as his gardener Fred Bettsworth told him, those who stay at home 'learns nothin'.¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Cited in Willes, *Gardens of the British working class*, p. 238.

⁹⁷ ESRO, ACC 11108/4/10/5.

⁹⁸ *Horsham Advertiser*, 27 Sept. 1884; Surrey History Centre (hereafter SHC), 5420/2/1.

⁹⁹ Thompson, *Lark Rise*, pp. 114–5. Burchardt has noted that by the late nineteenth century allotments were largely the preserve of men (Burchardt, *Allotment movement*, p. 170). For a discussion of the gendered division of garden labour see Sayer, *Country cottages*, pp. 99–101.

¹⁰⁰ The Technical Instruction Act of 1889 allowed local authorities to levy rates to fund technical and manual education. For a brief discussion of the implementation of Act in rural areas see R. Sellman, 'The country school', in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian countryside* (2 vols, 1981), p. 551.

¹⁰¹ WSRO, Par 86/7/19.

¹⁰² SHC, 5420/2/1.

¹⁰³ George Sturt (writing as George Bourne), *Memoirs of a Surrey labourer* ([1907], 1930), pp. 11–13.

V

In his autobiography Joseph Arch recorded that he kept his 'little house' and garden in 'apple-pie order'. His garden was 'choke full of fruit and vegetables in their season and I raised as many flowers as I could find room for'.¹⁰⁴ Arch was not, of course, an 'ordinary' agricultural labourer. Moreover, he was unusual because he owned his own house.¹⁰⁵ One of the greatest threats to the success of the labourer's garden was the insecurity of his cottage tenure which meant that he could be evicted at a week's notice. Giving evidence to the Royal Commission enquiring into the Housing of the Working Classes in 1884, the trade unionist and newspaper editor Alfred Simmons noted that insecurity in cottage tenures in Kent and Sussex meant that labourers did not want to invest in seed for their gardens and were 'careless respecting them'. When asked whether a labourer, given notice to quit his cottage, would be given any compensation for loss of garden crops, Simmons's response was 'no'. He also reported that in Kent farmers were appropriating labourers' gardens in order to create larger farms.¹⁰⁶ Sturt's account of the difficulties his gardener Fred Bettesworth experienced in finding a cottage in the final years of his life poignantly brings home the instability that many labourers faced. On one occasion, having already sown early peas and paid a neighbour to help him dig his plot, Bettesworth was forced to move out from his cottage because the landlord took exception to the 'filthy appearance' of his frail and mentally infirm wife.¹⁰⁷ Labourers might also experience the wilful destruction of their gardens by vengeful farmers if they found themselves in dispute with them. When farmer James Hodson's attempts to evict Sussex labourer James Nye from his cottage in 1861 proved unsuccessful, he twice turned his livestock onto Nye's garden.¹⁰⁸ Theft of garden produce was also a perennial problem. In his account of his childhood in the 'hungry forties' Heyshott labourer David Miles recorded that vegetable theft was rife:

folks used to put up a little 'ill o' taters for the winter, not two rods from their winders, but people 'ud come by night and steal 'em. A 'ungry belly makes a man desprit. They'd steal a'most anything, even bees and brocli from the garden.¹⁰⁹

There were also threats caused by disease or inclement weather conditions. Miles remembered the effects of the potato blight of the 1840s vividly:

never shall I forgit 'ow the folks went a-wanderin' about, peerin' at the 'taters, and tryin' to find out what wor wrong wi' 'em. It wor awful bad for the low class' many on 'em were nigh starvin'.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Warwick (ed.), *Joseph Arch*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁵ Arch was a hedger and ditcher. He also worked as a self-employed roofer and carpenter. ODNB, 'Arch, Joseph (1826–1919)', (accessed 2 Oct. 2018).

¹⁰⁶ BPP, 1884–5, C.4402, pp. 551, 556. Simmons established the Kent and Sussex Labourers' Union in 1872 and was its general secretary until 1887.

¹⁰⁷ Sturt, *Memoirs of a Surrey labourer*, pp. 134–42.

¹⁰⁸ J. Nye, *A small account of my travels through the wilderness*, ed. V. Gammon (1981), p. 31. Hodson was one of the overseers of the parish of Kingston where Nye was then living. He was trying to get Nye and his family removed to the parish of St Anne's in Lewes.

¹⁰⁹ Fisher Unwin, *The hungry forties*, p. 25.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

There were, of course, more mundane and habitual barriers to successful gardening, perhaps the greatest of which were the long hours that agricultural labourers had to work. In summer an ordinary labourer might work for ten hours a day, six days a week; men working with animals (horsemen, stockmen and shepherds) often worked longer hours, 13 or 14, and usually had to work on Sundays too, not all day but enough to disrupt their 'leisure' time.¹¹¹ Working days might be considerably longer for agricultural labourers who had to walk some distance to their place of work, a relatively common occurrence where there was a lack of affordable housing in the area. In his report to the Poor Law Board in 1850, Captain Robinson noted that lack of housing in the rural districts of Sussex and Surrey forced many agricultural labourers to live in towns and large villages; agricultural labourers living in the small city of Chichester, for example, had to walk up to five miles to get to work.¹¹² Working in a garden or on an allotment after a lengthy and strenuous working day can hardly have been a pleasurable task for many of these men but they were forced to do so, often until it was almost too dark to see or 'by moonshine', because they knew that if they did not 'they would positively starve'.¹¹³ The time they had available for allotment gardening might also be circumscribed by rules governing some allotments which precluded tenants from working on them on Sundays.¹¹⁴ The limitations on their time meant that some labourers were forced to forgo a day's paid work, which they could ill afford, in order to work on their gardens and allotments.¹¹⁵ There were also the logistics of getting water to a garden or an allotment during extended periods of dry weather. Flora Thompson noted that in the 1880s only three out of 30 cottages in Lark Rise had their own water supply and that the only 'public' well was on the outskirts of the hamlet on a vacant cottage plot. Most cottages had a water butt against an outside wall which was used for household laundry and for watering the garden but when the water ran out, women were forced to walk to the well, carrying the water home in buckets suspended from a yoke.¹¹⁶ Rowntree and May noted similar problems with water supply in many of the villages they investigated in 1912–13.¹¹⁷

VI

Jeremy Burchardt has argued that allotments made a much larger contribution to living standards than historians had previously recognized and played a crucial part in the family economies of those who had them.¹¹⁸ This is undoubtedly true but the provision of allotments across the country was highly uneven and in the southern counties of Sussex, Kent and Surrey they were never that common. In Sussex, the argument landowners and farmers used to justify the lack of allotments was that most cottages already had 'good' or 'fair' gardens. But many cottages had gardens that were significantly smaller than this and some had no garden at all.

¹¹¹ BPP, 1893–4, C.6894-I, *Reports by Mr William E. Bear*, pp. 9–10.

¹¹² BPP, 1850, 1152, pp. 81, 89.

¹¹³ Rowntree and Kendall, *How the labourer lives*, p. 74.

¹¹⁴ The rules of the Rotherfield Allotment Gardens (established in 1844) stipulated that 'no work may be done in the allotments on the Sabbath on any pretence

whatever' (ESRO, PAR 465/16/1).

¹¹⁵ Rowntree and Kendall, *How the labourer lives*, p. 55.

¹¹⁶ Thompson, *Lark Rise*, p. 22.

¹¹⁷ Rowntree and Kendall, *How the labourer lives*, p. 330.

¹¹⁸ Burchardt, *Allotment movement*, p. 4.

It is also notable that amongst the households that Rowntree and Kendall surveyed in 1912–13, those that held allotments still led hand-to-mouth existences with monotonous, nutritionally inadequate diets and had little in the way of surplus produce to sell.

The labourer's garden was vitally important to the success of the household as an economic unit. Returning home after a ten-hour working day, perhaps having walked some distance to and from work, many men may well have found the prospect of the beer shop more enticing than three or four hours of gardening but they knew if they did not put the work in when it was necessary their families would go hungry in the future.¹¹⁹ Gardening also had a social value to these households, however: the regularity with which men like William Steer and Jonathan Stevens entered their produce into gardening competitions suggests that they enjoyed the spirit of competition and associated male camaraderie as much as the cash prizes. Many labouring households also found the time to cultivate flower gardens, which were of no economic use to the household, usually located at the front of their cottages where they were most visible. As well as providing the occupants with aesthetic enjoyment these gardens no doubt also allowed them to display their respectability and social worth in the face of grinding and relentless poverty.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the living conditions of agricultural labourers remained poor. Although larger landowners like the sixth Duke of Richmond had made strenuous efforts to improve cottages on their estates, much rural housing was wholly inadequate. Social investigators repeatedly drew attention to poorly maintained, overcrowded and insanitary cottages.¹²⁰ The problem besetting the agricultural labourer at the end of the nineteenth century was the same as the one we encountered at its start: agricultural wages simply were not sufficient to allow him a better standard of living. The principle of self-help continued to underlie much of the social commentary on the plight of the agricultural labourer with productive gardening, either on an allotment or in a garden, seen as key to improving his material lot as well as encouraging in him habits of thrift and industry.¹²¹ However, as the evidence of Rowntree and Kendall showed, thriftiness was not a lesson most agricultural labouring families needed to learn; for those they surveyed (who were chosen to participate because of their sobriety, thrift and honesty), household budgets were as lean as the bones they used to make their soup, even with the contribution of their garden produce.¹²² The psychological impact of such austere lifestyles is eloquently conveyed by the words of one agricultural labourer's wife, Mrs Dewhurst, who we have already encountered complaining about the tedium and stringency of her diet: 'you can't really call it living; it's dragging of yourself along'.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Rowntree and Kendall, *How the labourer lives*, 1897), p. 74.

¹²⁰ See for example BPP, 1884–5, C.4402, especially pp. 533–57; *The Cottage Question: 1 Evidence showing the need of reform* (The Land Law Reform Association,

1897).

¹²¹ BPP, 1884–5, C.4402, p. 42.

¹²² Rowntree and Kendall, *How the labourer lives*, p. 38.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.