

The Olympic Allotment

For more than a century, the Manor Garden allotments have been a fertile source of fruit and veg for many local families. And then London won the 2012 Olympics

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At their heart, allotments are about stories. Every owner has a story, and every planting has one, and if you gather them all together in one place - the waiting-list sagas, the slug invasions, the strange-looking carrots, the shared cups of tea and barbecues at sunset - you have something called a community. Eighteen months ago, The Observer ran a story about the bountiful late-summer produce of an allotment in Hackney Wick tended by Samuel and Samantha Clark. The Clarks, the couple behind Moro restaurant and its cookbooks, were organising a Sunday lunch for 20 friends, and as they sat down to figs and chard and chilli and potato, a spectre hung over them like a finger of frost. An Olympic walkway was planned straight through their fertile soil.

At the time, the threat seemed reasonably distant; campaigns were planned, and there was fair optimism that the organisers would reconsider. The 80 plots had been there for more than 100 years. Painted huts and greenhouses had been erected next to wartime shelters, and the wartime shelters had been converted into stores for manure and watering cans, and all had a casual and weathered elegance about them that the style magazines would call 'distressed' and the rest of us would call 'real'. Those who visit, even the sportiest, pro-Olympic ones, find it difficult to comprehend how a few weeks of athletic prowess could be allowed to spoil something so treasured.

Visitors have other questions, too. The Olympic committees talk of regeneration, but what could be more regenerative than a conscientiously managed plot? How does the ambition to be 'the greenest Olympics ever' sit well with plans to uproot ancient soil for the laying of concrete? The Manor Garden Allotments combine to form the most photogenic pile of rusting iron, wire mesh, stone paving, muddy paths, wild grasses, strong daffodils, potatoes, avocados, artichokes, kohlrabi, peas, leeks, cauliflower and lollo rosso. No one has yet managed a recognisable mango, but multi-ethnicity ensures specialities from the Caribbean, Africa, the Med and the Middle East. These allotments are, of course, as much a true picture of our country as any shiny steel rail put up for the visiting world. Everyone's equal here; there are no medals for speed; no one uses the words 'focus' or 'being in the zone'.

'I've spent years nurturing my fig trees, cherry trees, apple trees and roses and artichokes,' says one plot holder. Another has split her site into three: a vegetable plot, a shingle garden for birds and butterflies, a lawn with ambitions for a small orchard. 'I have lots of wildlife habitats for wasps and

bees and spiders. In spring, the pond has several dozen newts, and then I eagerly wait to see dragonflies emerging. I'm a newcomer, I've only been there 14 years. I don't have a garden at home, so it's everything to me.'

The allotments sit at the edge of the Olympic Park. An aerial photograph of the 500-acre site would reveal the allotments at the bottom, by the River Lea, beneath the main Olympic stadium. The computer-generated images of the new landscaped walkways beside the Aquatics Centre and Velopark show potted greenery and leafy vistas, an estate agent's vision of tamed ruralism 'and just 17 minutes to central London'. The people in these images are usually rushing about from one fantasy of the future to another, and many of them look strangely like Sebastian Coe. They dwell exclusively within the pages of the *World of Interiors*. Wellingtons are not a useful shoe in this environment. In this story, a conspiracy theory looms: the real reason the allotments may be forced to go is their ungainliness. A wrecked beauty inhabits the whole area, but some see the beauty, and some the wreck.

There are other theories. 'We've heard everything now,' says Julie Sumner, assistant secretary of the Allotment Association and the most vocal of the campaigners. 'The latest reasons are we have to move for health and safety and for insurance. Because we are on the designated Olympic site we are subject to the same insurance stipulations as other workers. But give us all a hard hat and we'll be happy to wear them.' Previous reasons for the eviction have included a risk of flooding caused by the proposed reshaping of the landscape, and an expansive width of pedestrian paving that apparently can't go elsewhere. 'All our experts, including David Mackay, a chief architect of the Olympic Village in Barcelona, have told us that that's rubbish,' Sumner says. 'But the best one was the security issue. Ken Livingstone actually said a terrorist could break in and pose as a gardener and plant a bomb.'

The land was secured for growing in 1900, when Major Arthur Villiers bequeathed it for use in perpetuity by east end families; his resolve was strengthened when he saw the appalling deprivations suffered during the Great War. In the second world war, the allotments became a model for the grow-your-own Dig for Victory campaign. When journalists visit these days they are drawn in particular to the tireless hospitality of Hassan Ali, a Turkish Cypriot with a plot for almost 20 years. He is fond of one joke: 'Giving the Olympics to London was a mistake - they just pressed the wrong button.'

But 18 months after Hassan Ali joined the Clarks for lunch, the bulldozers stand ready. At the end of March, the date of the eviction order was delayed from 2 April to July. Some allotmenters have resigned themselves to defeat and have moved to other plots. Others are holding firm, keen to harvest this year's cabbages and poppies. The hardiest are still devising ways that their land could be incorporated into the Olympic plan. Julie Sumner, who has had her plot for 12 years, argues for incorporation. 'We're still planting and plan to harvest in the summer, and we're still pursuing legal arguments. We thought there could be a little visitors' centre explaining the history, and the fact that Arthur Villiers was good friends with Winston Churchill, and we could stress the very British philanthropic tradition and the point that our allotments have been copied all over the world.' There is another scheme, surely a public relations coup. 'How about feeding one country's athletes with our food?'

Sumner asks. 'Admittedly it would have to be a very small country with not many participants, but we probably have enough of a selection to keep anyone happy and fit no matter where they came from.'

Failing this, the London Development Agency has earmarked some new land at Marsh Lane Fields, on the borders of Waltham Forest, a mile to the north. An earlier attempt at relocation was refused planning permission, and, in the face of much local opposition objecting to the change of use of public land, a new application will be considered next month. But even if successful, it won't be the same. The community will splinter, the plots will be fewer and smaller, new topsoil will be needed, and the land may take many seasons to be reworked to the conditions the Manor Garden owners enjoy now. The LDA also has plans to turn some of the Olympic Park land back into allotments at the conclusion of the games, but the vague and distant uncertainties of what it calls the Legacy provide little comfort now.

And so we root for the underdog, and hope for a story that ends with reversal. If nothing else, there is always occupation, and a continued faith in the indigenous fact that the allotments got there first. But Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* got there even earlier:

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

For all its melancholy, the sentiments hold firm: progress and regeneration are not the problem; the problem isn't even sport and big money. The problem is sensitivity and fairness and coexistence, and those are virtues and goals as old as the land.