Folk memory provides us with images of rural life in England, which has the characteristics of simplicity, community and self-sufficiency. One of the villains in the destruction of this way of life was the enclosure movement. Use of common land, while accepted and expected was not necessarily a legal entitlement (1). As a partial remedy for the loss of the use of common land, enclosure awards often included provision for allotments for the labouring poor (2). Consequently enclosure was one of the drivers for the provision of allotments. Although at the time, the areas enclosed were rural, they may now be within an urban area, as is the case with some of those around Reading.

The loss of the use of common land when enclosures took place was not just an economic hardship, but in any case, that is to miss the point. The poet John Clare (1793-1864) wrote at this time and as editor of a selected edition of his poems, Geoffrey Summerfield writes (p146), "...he evolved a sense of heritage, of being heir to natural blessings that were not merely a matter of sensory gratification or of physical well-being, but rather, of moral and spiritual import: fundamentally a matter of a wise love between the individual and his environment." This Summerfield contrasts with the mentality of the enclosure programme. In “The Mores”, John Clare specifically refers to enclosure and what was lost (3).

“Inclosure came and trampled on the grave
Of labour’s rights and left the poor a slave”

In Berkshire and more particularly around Reading enclosure came relatively late (4). Reading’s current boundaries include at least three (that I have discovered so far) areas where “Allotments for the Labouring Poor” were established as a result of enclosure.

Caversham was at the time within Oxfordshire, joining with Reading in 1911. Emmer Green allotments are part of the area set aside by the "Inclosure of Gallowstree Common, Emmer Green, Cane End Common, The Moor and other Commons and waste lands situate in the parish of Caversham in the County of Oxford..." in March 1865. The area of one acre, two roods and twenty one perches was given in trust to the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor (5). The map of the areas to be enclosed shows the plot exactly as it is today.

The other allotments were in Tilehurst, (Tilehurst Poors Allotments) (1817) (6) and Whitley, ((Whitley Wood Lane allotments) (1858) (7). Tilehurst Poors Allotments still exist, but are managed privately by Tilehurst Poor’s Land Charity. Whitley Wood Lane allotments were lost to housing in the early 1990’s (8). Management of these allotments transferred from the Trustees to Reading Borough Council in 1927 (9).
In the “General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire” (10), W.F. Mavor although having some criticisms of the process of enclosure by Act of Parliament concluded, “...and it may be said in regard to all property not in severalty:—

“The lands that many owner’s share,
Can never know an owner’s care.”

Enclosure was all about efficiency and effectiveness in the exploitation of land – whether for agriculture or commercial extraction of natural resources.

This might be contrasted with another couplet that I found quoted in a transcription of a lecture “Old Caversham” (11) given by Mr Wing in 1894 when he refers to the impact of enclosures on Caversham.

“All should unite to guard what all may share;
The general good should be the general care.”

Emmer Green allotments today are laid out with perfection and have an air of tranquillity. In existence for almost 150 years, they are one of the oldest allotment sites in Reading. They have not been untouched by progress around them. At the end of 1937 and beginning of 1938 there was a long running consideration of the erection of telegraph poles. Permission had been requested by the Post Office Engineering Department and was initially refused with the request to place them underground (12). The Committee was eventually overruled by the Council that approved the erection at the cost of 1s (5p) per pole.

**FACT PANEL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of plots: (13)</th>
<th>63</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full plot equivalent: (13)</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date allotments established:</td>
<td>1865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date taken on by Council:</td>
<td>currently unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous use:</td>
<td>unknown, open land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status: (14)</td>
<td>Statutory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References

(1) In particular see, Bethanie Afton, The Manmade Landscape. Chapter 5. Downloadable from:
www.berkshireenclosure.org.uk/research_impact_enclosure.asp

(2) As well as (1) above, there are many academic works covering the enclosure movement that include empirical research. For example, Enclosure in Berkshire, editor Ross Wordie. Published by the Berkshire Record Society Vol 5 2000. These should be consulted for a full analysis of the legal process and economic impact of enclosure. In addition Jeremy Burchardt also discusses enclosure in, The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873.


(4) There is a website, “New Landscapes” which makes digital copies of enclosure documents available on line as well as information and useful resources about enclosure in Berkshire between 1738 and 1883.
www.berkshireenclosure.org.uk/background_temporal.asp
This includes a useful search facility for example using the term “poor” at:

(5) Caversham (1865) – Ref: D/P162/26/1A (Page 8); map Caversham (1865) – Ref: D/P162/26/1B. (BRO)
Available on-line at
www.berkshireenclosure.org.uk/find_via_parish_details.asp?parish=Caversham

(6) Tilehurst (1817) – Ref: Q/RDC/83A; map Tilehurst (1817) Ref: Q/RDC/83B. (BRO) Available on-line at
www.berkshireenclosure.org.uk/find_via_parish_details.asp?parish=Tilehurst

(7) Reading (1858 (Whitley)) – Ref: Q/RDC/96A; map Reading (1858 (Whitley)) – Ref: Q/RDC/96A. (BRO)
Available on-line at
www.berkshireenclosure.org.uk/find_via_parish_details.asp?parish=Reading

(8) Reading Borough Council State of the Environment Report, Chapter 4 Open Space. On line at:

(9) The transfer took place on 1 April 1927. As well as 4 acres of land, investments and stock were transferred. Allotments Committee and Smallholdings Committee, 11 April 1927. R/AC1/3/37. (BRO).

(10) General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire; William Mavor, 1813. Produced for the consideration of the Board of Agriculture.
Lecture on Old Caversham, by Mr W. Wing at Caversham Library in 1894. A transcript of the lecture which refers to the Emmer Green allotments can be found at: www.caversham.org.uk/historyandfolklore/old_caversham.pdf

Allotments committee minutes 22 November 1937 and 7 March 1938. R/AC1/3/68. (BRO)


Reading Borough Council 2005 Allotment Plan.

© Evelyn Williams 2012

For Mr Chapman who shared his love of the countryside and John Clare with his school.