

## 25 YEARS ON AND STILL DIGGING

The City of Ely Allotments Association Annual Awards Evening on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2016 had a special significance as this year it was celebrating 25 years since its inception. To mark the occasion special certificates were presented to eight current plot holders who were there at the beginning and are still members. The recipients were presented with their awards and certificates by the Mayor of Ely, Councillor Ian Lindsay, who is also an allotment holder. The photograph below shows Peter Holden, the original chairman and now life president of the Association receiving his certificate.

The first 25 years of the Association have not all been easy ones but prior to its founding in 1991, the allotment sites in Ely had also had mixed fortunes. Up until 1990 allotments in Ely had been run by the City of Ely Council with some assistance from City of Ely and District Horticultural Society. There was very little practical maintenance and the annual rent rose by a small amount each year.

During the 80s, take up of allotments was low, and declining, the Bridge Fen site was the most popular site with its GroBag type black fen soil. The New Barns site was portrayed as a dubious area, with less than 50% occupation, and this was after the original site had been reduced in size at an earlier time by more than half to provide a children's playing field and an area for housing development now containing the Clayway housing estate. A site in St Johns Road had recently been taken over for development, with no objections.

The Upherds Lane site, a city centre location consisting of 19 x 10 pole plots had good occupation but the fence was in a poor state, and rubbish had accumulated because bonfires were deemed as a nuisance to the nearby houses. In 1982, this site became a case for allotment protest. A building plan suddenly materialised, and evidence of a development drawn up in the 60s came to the fore. Various tactics and inducements were employed to try and convince tenants and residents of the benefit of concrete over tilled land. Fortunately, it was proved that the site was Statutory Allotment Land, and the dedication and efforts of the tenants were rewarded when Nicholas Ridley, Financial Secretary to The Treasury under Margaret Thatcher turned down the application for change of use. This all happened while the Falkland Islands were being rid of an invader, and before email and social media. Door knocking, telephone and the post were the 'weapons of democracy'.

Since this time allotment provision in Ely has improved. The City of Ely Allotments Association was set up in 1991 to manage allotment sites on behalf of the City Council. The Association has complete autonomy over setting and collecting rents, organising repairs

and plot allocation. Two small city sites have been obtained, extra plots have been added to the hundred at Bridge Fen but unfortunately one privately owned site has been reclaimed by the owner. However, compensation was gained and used to improve roadways and fencing on the remaining sites.

The Association is consulted on the need for Allotment land as part of Ely's rapid housing development. The previously rundown New Barns site is a thriving, fully tenanted well managed site, looking forward to the benefits of a recently installed water supply. The nineteen original plots on the Upherds Lane site are now providing 'the Allotment Experience' for 43 local families, and will soon have a water supply. There is a perpetual waiting list of at least 20 for plots, and it has been as high as 50.

Thus, over its first 25 years, due to the dogged determination and hard work of the tenants, the foresight and cooperation of The City of Ely Council, The City of Ely Allotments Association is a great example of 'localism' in action. Long may it continue.

Graham Bond  
Chairman Ely Allotments Association

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