



## MARKET GARDENING HERITAGE TEACHERS' NOTES

## ABOUT

### Welcome!

This document contains an overview of market gardening in the Vale of Evesham. It has been written to provide background information for the Market Gardening School Resource Pack, created as part of a National Lottery Heritage Fund project. A separate *Curriculum Links* document sets out areas of the National Curriculum that can be covered by an exploration of market gardening.

### About the school resource pack

The digital school pack ([www.explorethepast.co.uk/school-resource-mgh](http://www.explorethepast.co.uk/school-resource-mgh)) is primarily aimed at Key Stage 2-3 learners, but can easily be drawn upon for any age group. It is divided into two parts:

- ***Records from the Past* is a series of topic-based webpages filled with sources** - old photos, oral histories and written records - alongside explanations and supporting information. These pages can be explored by pupils themselves or used as a resource bank to create your own activities and lessons.
- **To accompany *Records from the Past*, a collection of supporting documents for teachers are available** from the *Teachers' section* webpage. Alongside links to the National Curriculum, there are resources to support specific History and STEM activities.

No prescriptive activity sheets or lesson plans are included within the pack. It is hoped that the flexibility provided by the *Records from the Past* resource pool enables the pack to be used in various ways and adapted to suit different teaching styles, age groups and subjects.

### Acknowledgements

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# WHAT IS MARKET GARDENING?

## Overview

The Vale of Evesham was famous for market gardening during the 19th and 20th centuries. Vegetables, fruit, herbs and cut flowers grown here were once sold up and down the country – from Glasgow to Covent Garden and Penzance.

Unlike allotment produce, market garden crops were grown specifically for sale. Traditionally done by hand, market gardening was physically hard work and vulnerable to the weather, pests and market prices. Most plots were narrow 1-3 acre strips growing a wide variety of produce, but it was common for growers to rent several grounds totalling 5 or more acres, which could be some distance apart. Tales of immaculate, weed free grounds highlight the considerable knowledge, skill and pride that went into successful market gardens.

Market gardening was a key industry and way of life for many families and communities within the Vale. Not only were families roped into helping on relative's grounds, but many local trades were connected to the area's abundant production of food, from transport companies to canning factories, blacksmiths and basket makers. Yet today only hints remain: orchards have returned to open fields and most of the market gardening sheds that dotted the Vale have fallen down or been demolished.

## Asparagus to wallflowers: an A-Z of crops

Alongside the area's most famous produce, Evesham asparagus and Pershore plums, market gardeners packed a wide range of crops on to their plots. Most were transported by rail, and later lorries, to markets and kitchens across Britain's cities, but it was not all about food - deep red wallflowers were sometimes sold for dye and during World War I valuable supplies of medicinal herbs were grown and dried.

**Plums, apples, pears, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, cherries, currants, spring onions, beans, peas, sprouts, asparagus, turnips, marrows, tomatoes, wallflowers (gillies), daffodils, lettuce, parsley, sage, medicinal herbs and more.**

## Scattered locations

The amount of land a family rented differed considerably, with some market gardens large enough to employ helpers, whilst part-time growers had a small piece of land that they worked in evenings and at weekends. It was useful to have land on different soils, so growers tended to hold plots some distance apart or even in different parishes, meaning that bicycles were a common sight.

## Market gardener's hovel

To provide shelter and somewhere to store equipment, small wooden, corrugated tin and occasional brick structures were built at the ends of many grounds. All as individual as the growers who built them, they are known locally as 'hovels'.

Hovels (or 'ovels') were not just a common sight in the landscape, but an integral part of social life within the Vale. Neighbouring growers would sometimes congregate together in a hovel over mealtimes or in the evenings to share gossip, brag over successes, bemoan misfortunes and share a few home brewed drinks.

For some growers, their hovel doubled up as temporary accommodation if trouble arose at home or travelling workers stayed to help a while. Once a month, a hovel in the Littletons even acted as a barber's shop for locals!

The term 'hovel' (or 'ovel') is local to the Vale of Evesham and its use even varies between villages!



### Resources

- Historic photos of growing process
- Virtual hovel tour (interactive image with labels)
- Records and images of what crops were grown
- Oral history clip discussing crop variety
- Records that highlight challenges of market gardening
- Audio recording of the poem 'A Market Gardener's Prayer'

**Over 1500 hovels were built in the Vale of Evesham, of which 80% have already disappeared.**

Of the hovels that remained in 2020, **over 40%** were in the process of falling down.

# START OF MARKET GARDENING

## When and why did market gardening first appear?

Incredibly, the everyday eating of vegetables and dedicated markets didn't become commonplace until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There are several key reasons for the eventual growth of market gardening in the Vale:

1. **Highly fertile soils and favourable climate**
2. **The railway reached Evesham in 1852**, allowing produce to reach markets further afield
3. **Along with opportunity, there was also a need for farmers and agricultural labourers to diversify**, as cheap American imports of grain and poor harvests in the 1870s led to a nationwide agricultural depression.

## Potted history of the industry's growth

The world doesn't stand still for long. Following the expansion of market gardening and planting of orchards during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, local growers formed the Littleton & Badsey Growers (LBG) co-operative to use their collective bargaining power.

In the face of high unemployment following World War I, ex-servicemen were encouraged to take up fruit and vegetable growing and more farmland was divided up into market gardening plots. Despite early prosperity, falling fruit prices caused a slump in the profitability of orchards during the 1920s and '30s, until war returned in 1939 with a renewed need for home grown fruit and vegetables.



Market gardening continued to be carried out by hand into the 1950s and beyond, but unheated glasshouses, introduced to Offenham in the 1930s by a Dutch grower, along with tractors gradually became more common.

## Evesham Custom

Few market gardeners owned their grounds. As most land was rented, especially in the early days, a local custom developed that allowed out-going tenants to sell their tenant-right to the highest bidder. This worked to the benefit of the most successful market gardeners, who were able to bid for the most fertile land, and compensated out-going growers for any investments they had made, such as planting fruit trees. Originally started as a gentleman's agreement, in 1895 it became legally recognised as part of the *'Market Gardeners Compensation Act'*.

### Resources

- Evidence for the start of market gardening from census and land use records
- News article and images connected to the factors behind market gardening's growth
- Audio recording of the poem 'Taking to the Land'

## PEOPLE

**Market gardeners worked hard, often 6 days a week, to make enough money from growing fruit and vegetables to look after their families. Most of the people in charge of market gardens were men, but they didn't work alone - it was a whole family effort.**

### Children

Children from gardening families were expected to help during the holidays, as well as at weekends and after school during busy seasons. Within the archives is a wonderful collection of letters from 1933 written by school children in Badsey and Pershore describing their Easter holidays. Long days tying onions or picking fruit are the tasks most often mentioned, so it's no surprise that mealtimes - all four of them: breakfast (c 6.30am), lunch (9.30am), dinner (noon) and tea (c 6pm) - feature so often.

### Women

The occupation of market gardener's wives is usually described as 'domestic duties' on census records. This disguises the fact that many women worked on the land, helping to plant, pick and pack crops alongside looking after a household and children. There are numerous stories of produce being tied at home or babies and toddlers taken to the land, so mothers could work whilst keeping an eye on their little ones.





## Hired hands

During busy planting and harvesting seasons, extra help was needed. Most growers received help from family members, but larger market gardeners employed additional workers when needed. Whilst many workers were local, travellers were an important part of the harvest work force.

Market gardening provided ample employment for locals most of the year, but 19th century records show that Evesham struggled with high unemployment rates and poverty during the winter. Seasonal unemployment continued to be a problem until the 20th century, when the introduction of brussels sprouts shortened the lull in winter work.

## Littleton & Badsey Growers

The 'LBG', as it was known locally, was a co-operative for growers by growers. High rail fares and delivery issues (in one extreme case a grower was charged transport costs despite the truck of asparagus catching fire!), led to the LBG forming in 1908. With the weight of the local growing community behind it, the LBG was an integral part of market gardening in the Vale of Evesham.

### Resources

- Letters writing in 1933 by schoolchildren in Badsey and Pershore
- Childhood memories (both written and audio recordings)
- Historic photos of children and women working on market gardens
- Records of the wages paid to women and travelling workers

## OFF TO MARKET

### Travelling to market

**Aberdeen to Penzance, Belfast to Covent Garden** - fruit and veg grown here in the Vale of Evesham was once sold at markets across the country.

The Vale's national reach was made possible by the arrival of the railway, which opened at Evesham in 1852. Speed was of the essence: produce picked one day could be in Glasgow early the next morning, before wholesale markets opened. As the scale of market gardening grew, villages began petitioning for their own stations, leading to the opening of stations or goods sidings at Blackminster, Aldington, Fladbury, Eckington, Hinton-on-the-Green and Harvington.

Big changes took place after World War II, when lorry transport took over as a result of unreliable trains, increasing rail charges and the closure of many smaller stations. By the mid-1960s, all except Pershore and one of Evesham's two stations had closed. Numerous haulage companies sprang up and even today the area remains a hub for refrigerated road transport.

### Selling produce

Growers had several options when it came to selling the fruits of their labour and they commonly sold crops by various means in order to increase profits. The main routes available to growers were:

- **Local auction** - Evesham had two markets (Smithfield and Central) in addition to those in Pershore. Produce at these auctions was primarily bought by wholesale merchants or local commissioning agents on behalf of customers across the country.
- **Commissioning agents** - produce could be sent directly to markets around the country, such as Birmingham or Manchester, where a salesman negotiated the price on behalf of the grower for a fee. Some larger market gardeners acted as dealers, selling their own crops and those of smaller growers directly to wholesalers.
- **Merchants and processors** - growers could also sell direct to canning factories or local merchants who processed fruit ready for pulping or preserving whole.

## Resources

- Historic photos of transport over time
- Oral history clips of how produce was sold and transported
- Historic adverts for produce markets, basket labels and orders
- Location map and list of all the places where a large market garden sold their produce



## SUPPORTING TRADES

Market gardening involved more than just growing - it required the support of blacksmiths, basket makers, transport companies, auctioneers, canning factories and many more.

### Blacksmiths

The specialist tools market gardeners needed didn't always exist. As the industry grew, local blacksmiths and growers began to invent or adapt the tools they needed: two tine forks to cope with local heavy clay soils, hoes with interchangeable heads, sprout net holders and asparagus knives, to name a few.

### Baskets for every occasion

**Pot hampers, flats, chips, sieves and nets** - just a few of the specialist packing containers used for market gardening produce. With prices heavily dependent on quality and freshness, it was vital for crops to be optimally packed. As many fruits and vegetables were sold by weight, the number of standard size containers filled became shorthand for quantity: growers account books record prices for '15 chips of strawberries' and '22 pots of plums'.





Traditional wicker 'pot hampers' were astoundingly heavy when filled - a pot hamper of plums weighed 72lbs (33kg) when filled! Due to their extraordinary weight, half pots were introduced. Gradually, wicker produce baskets were phased out by smaller and cheaper alternatives.

### Jam & canning factories

Bottling and canning were valuable ways of preserving soft fruit, and suitable for sending to the frontlines during wartime. Due to the vast quantities of produce, especially plums, grown in the Vale many factories were set up in the area - Smedley's and Beach's in Evesham were two of the biggest names, along with Phipp's in Wyre Piddle and the Pomona Jam Factory in Pershore.

#### Resources

- Newspaper adverts from 1920 that highlight a range of related trades
- Photos of the different baskets used by market gardeners
- Images of specialist tools produced by local blacksmiths
- Written and recorded memories of Beach's jam factory
- Historic photos of canning

# WORLD WARS

## World War I

### Medicinal herbs

Increased demand but a reduced supply of certain medicines led the wartime government to ask the public for help with a list of key medicinal plants.

By 1917, market gardeners in Badsey, Bretforton, Offenham and the Littletons were growing vital supplies of belladonna (to treat nerve agent poisonings), henbane and stramonium (for stomach/ intestinal problems). The local contribution was significant: Evesham growers provided a quarter of Britain's henbane and a fifth of the country's belladonna by the end of the war. Despite concerns about growing such potent crops on unfenced land, thankfully there were no reported cases of poisoning.

### Prisoners of war

With many of Britain's farm workers away fighting, there were not enough people left to work the land. It was decided that some German prisoners of war would help farmers and market gardeners. Starting in 1917, over 400 German POWs were sent to the Evesham area.

## World War II

### Wartime changes

Rural Britain did not escape from the changes brought about by World War II. Food production was essential work, but market gardening still witnessed significant changes:

- **Crops** - asparagus and strawberries were deemed 'luxury crops' and severely reduced in favour of potatoes and onions. Most other soft fruit was encouraged for making jam, as it could easily be sent to the frontlines.
- **Rationing** - fertilisers and fuel were rationed, whilst many materials and equipment, including string and packing containers, were in short supply.
- **Labour** - market gardening was a reserved occupation but only for those with their own land, meaning that part-time growers and hired hands were called up for military service. With many away at war, local families struggled to fill the gap. The Women's Land Army, civilian volunteers and, later on, Prisoners of War helped alleviate the shortage.

Despite difficulties, the high demand for food during WWII meant that it was a boom time for many market gardeners.

### Women's Land Army

Over 200,000 women enrolled between 1939 and 1950. Many came from the cities to help fill rural labour shortages, including to farms and market gardens across the Vale of Evesham. Whilst some received a little training, most learnt on the job. Hard manual work in all weathers was challenging and for many land girls it was their first time away from home, but the companionship and camaraderie of the Land Army made it an enjoyable time for some.

Small groups of land girls were stationed in several villages, including Wickhamford, Harvington, Charlton and Great Comberton, either in old country houses or temporary hostels.

### Prisoners of War

As World War II continued, the number of Prisoners of War (POWs) in camps across Britain increased. Despite initial reluctance, it was decided that Italian and most German POWs - all but the most ardent Nazis - could work on the land. Nearly 40,000 Italians and 70,000 Germans worked on British farms and market gardens during the war.

There were numerous POW camps in and around the Vale of Evesham, including at South Littleton, Long Marston, Fladbury, Ashchurch, Chipping Campden and Ettington Park. Local farmers and growers could request labour when needed, for which prisoners were paid in imitation money that could be redeemed at the camp shop.

Whilst there was inevitable hostility and mistrust, there are also stories of lasting friendships and marriages that took place between POWs and locals. The repatriation of German troops took several years and, when all camps finally closed in 1948, 25,000 Germans chose to stay in Britain, including some in the Vale.

#### Resources

- WWI photos of German prisoners of war at Broad Marston
- Oral history clips focused on rationing during WWII
- Photos of WWII ration coupons
- Written memories and photos of the Women's Land Army during WWII
- Written memories and records of prisoners of war during WWII

## CHANGE & DECLINE

### Changing tastes

One legacy of World War II was a change to both the national population and local communities. Several German and Italian ex-prisoners of war stayed or returned to the Vale of Evesham and became market gardeners, introducing different crops such as peppers, aubergines and courgettes, and later polytunnels to the area. Demand for certain produce - such as thyme, which is frequently used in Caribbean cooking - also changed as communities from around the world arrived to help rebuild post-war Britain.

### Decline

The gradual increase in mechanisation from the 1950s, followed by the introduction of supermarkets, affordability of freezers reducing demand for fresh produce and cheaper imports meant that **by the 1970s and '80s market gardening was in decline.**

- **Increased mechanisation** reduced the cost of growing and harvesting crops, which made traditional market gardening by hand less economically viable.
- **Supermarkets** wanted to deal with one large supplier rather than many small growers and could be very precise and fickle with their requirements. There was also a push for fruit and vegetables to be available all year, rather than when it was in season, which required international imports.
- **Cheaper imports** from abroad, often attributed by growers to Britain joining the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, lowered the prices paid for Vale produce.





## Gone forever?

Traditional, hand worked market gardens have all but disappeared from this area and are unlikely to be seen again on a sizable scale. Technology and the world have changed, but the growing of fresh produce for market hasn't left the Vale. Glasshouses at Offenham and Fladbury continue to grow tomatoes, salad crops and oriental vegetables, strawberries raised in polytunnels at Bretforton have won national awards and Evesham remains a hub for refrigerated lorry transport.

### Resources

- Oral history clips discussing changing tastes, market gardening's decline and how grower's found enjoyment in their work
- Photos of the industry's gradual mechanisation
- Images of horticulture in the Vale today
- Historic and modern aerial photos showing how the land had changed over time

## EXPLORE FURTHER

### Asum Grammar

A broad dialect was spoken by many Vale residents and surrounding villages until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Asum grammar comes from the local name for Evesham (or Eve-a-shum) and common features include dropping aitches, replacing *ea* or *ai* sounds with *y* and running several words into one:

<b>yer</b>	hear
<b>byuns</b>	beans
<b>Ow bist?</b>	How are you?
<b>Werst bin?</b>	Where have you been?
<b>Oi spec usullbee pullin unyuns this marnin</b>	I expect we'll be pulling onions this morning
By kind permission of Will Dallimore, The Badsey Society.	

Asum can still be heard around and about, but its use has faded over the years. Market gardens, Evesham produce auctions and local pubs are among the last places where this broad local accent was regularly heard.

### Resources

- Two poems written by a local poet in the Asum dialect - available as audio recordings and text

## Where to look next

The lists below don't include everything but are good places to start if you're looking to explore further.

### Sources from the time

**Ask your own relatives, friends or neighbours!** You might already know someone who worked in or knows about market gardening.

**Worcestershire Archives** - original copies of many historic records are held at The Hive in Worcester, as well as the oral history interviews, photos and research collected by the Market Gardening Heritage project. The archive is open to the public and part of the collection can be searched online:

[e-services.worcestershire.gov.uk/CalmView](http://e-services.worcestershire.gov.uk/CalmView)

### Books

**Digging for a Living**, by T. C. Sparrow (2011) - a useful introduction to market gardening, with a focus on the Badsey area. It is available from several local libraries or can be bought from the Badsey Society.

**How the Pershore Plum Won the Great War**, edited by Maggie Andrews & Jenni Waugh (2016) - available from local libraries or to buy.

### Websites

**Badsey Society website** - photos, local memories and research of market gardening.

**Historic maps** - digital copies of old maps have been shared by the National Library of Scotland. Start your search by heading to 'Find by Place' and entering a location.