

Some extracts relating to the **Stowupland Food Production Society**, home Vegetable growing and the allotments between Church Road and Gipping Road.

Taken from 'As I remember It, Book 1 (p.46 to 49)' compiled by Rev Leslie Brame and based on his childhood memories of Stowupland before 1940.

The home garden

I must talk about Dad as a gardener. He was scientific in his approach without knowing it! He made gardening interesting to me, because I always wanted to know the "why" and "wherefore"s of everything we did. Dad belonged to a small group known as "The **Stowupland Food Production Society**", consisting of farm workers and householders and headed by a schoolteacher who could cope with the simple book-keeping involved. In the early part of the year all members were issued with a catalogue from **Sutton Seeds**, from which they would select what crops or flowers they intended to grow in the coming year. Dad would pore over the catalogue, calling me in to "help" him choose the seeds. How many packets of cress seed could we use, or how much mustard to go with the cress? And radishes, would it be better to go for a change to "white globe", or should we stay with our usual "French breakfast"? Or, perhaps this year, both? And peas should we take "Marrowfat" or "Long-pod"? French beans were doubtful; we did not always need them. Green beans for our bean row would always be Empire Scarlet.

Runners, they could not be bettered! Then there were parsnips, carrots, turnips, sometimes kohlrabi, cabbages, savoys, Brussels sprouts, celery. Going through the catalogue made sure that we forgot nothing, even if I have not remembered! Mum was brought in to discuss flower seeds, though most of the flowers she used were perennials, and some of them self-seeding. Some garden produce was bought from a different source, I cannot remember where it was; things like seed potatoes which had to come from Scotland, ready-grown plants like strawberries and tomatoes—they came later in the season.

When the Sutton's seed list was completed, it was returned to the convenor of the Society, and he would forward the orders with an appropriate sum of money. Then about two weeks later the members of the Society would foregather at the school again, for the distribution of seeds according to the orders sent in, and some would appreciate the voluntary work involved and some would grumble that they had not got what they ordered, but that's human nature! Dad would store the seeds in the driest cool place he could find, and sow them in the garden as the season required.

The vegetable garden

Winter was the time for conditioning the soil. The whole back garden must be dug over one spit deep and the clods left large to get wet and then frozen, so the ice would expand and break up the large clods so they could be knocked down to a reasonable tilth for planting. The digging was laid across the width of the garden, so rows of vegetables could be planted straight across and a space left between rows to walk and break up the surface with a hoe. Some vegetables that we needed in quantity, like onions or carrots, would take up two or three rows, thus forming "beds". The potato patch with its ridges would take up about one third of the whole garden.

During the winter Dad would negotiate with the horseman at the farm to bring us a tumbrel load of good farm manure, always pig manure if possible, to which we would add our own rich chicken manure, or pig manure if we had pigs. We never called it manure; that was considered "twee". In the words of one straightforward farmer, it was not "stinking manure", it was "good, healthy muck". And MUCK we always called it! When it was delivered to our garden the muck did have a rich, pungent odour, but as the prevailing wind was south-westerly it rarely bothered anyone in the houses. The heap was strategically placed in a particular spot in the back garden, so that it could be efficiently used for the benefit of growing vegetables. Generally speaking, root vegetables like carrots, parsnips, beetroot and radishes, would be planted in areas which had been heavily manured the previous year. Whereas heavy feeders like the brassica family, along with onions and celery, would receive their heavy doses of the fertiliser.

Distribution was usually worked in with digging. As each spadeful of earth was turned up, we would be careful to pull out weeds like bellvine, or bindweed, speargrass, and docks, and put them in a bucket to be dried out and burned at a later date. The ridge of earth thrown up across the garden would leave a trench at about the depth of one spit. This is where we should bring along a barrow-load of muck and spread it the length of the trench. The next row of soil thrown up would bury the muck at about a spade's depth, and the muck would do its good work of making a rich soil of good texture because of the decomposing straw in it. Then onions, cabbages, Brussels sprouts, cauliflowers would be planted in their season, and leeks and celery would be planted in deep trenches with a layer of muck in the bottom. With beans and peas, we did double

digging, two spits deep, even into clay, and put a generous layer of muck deep down, so they would keep growing over a long season.

Potatoes had special treatment. Our favourites were the well-shaped Arran Chiefs, and the attractive red King Edwards. Until frosts were over we kept potatoes in trays in some safe place where they could green up and sprout. The well-sprouted potatoes were then cut in half and immersed in either soot or slaked lime to prevent attacks by slugs. Thus prepared, they would be planted in trenches and covered up by ridges formed with swan-necked hoes. The ridges might be made higher as the plants grew, because potatoes are formed on the base of the stems, not the roots. We would watch carefully for any signs of potato disease, which would show up as brown spots on the green leaves. Then we would spray the haulms with copper dioxide solution, and if any disease remained the rain would wash it to the bottom of the valleys, well away from the tubers being formed around the stems. In spite of all efforts, a wet season would leave us with some diseased potatoes, which were very difficult to dispose of.

Peas and beans needed a different kind of care, because they were climbers, and needed support in the form of stakes. Peas have tendrils, and need branch-like stakes with plenty of side twigs. Runner beans need straight poles to wind themselves around. We usually planted the beans and peas in double rows, and leaned the poles into each other and tied them wigwam style. They needed that firmness because when the beans were fruiting the vines carried quite a heavy weight.

The allotment

The annual supply of pea-sticks and bean-poles illustrates Dad's skill in caring for the garden. In addition to the large areas located near the cottage, he also rented from a nearby farmer about an acre of land. To get to it, we went to the bottom of our garden by a wide strip of land that would allow a tumbrel to pass. Then we crossed a ditch, serviced by a culvert, and that landed us on a wide carriageway usable by farm wagons and machinery. It was, however, unpaved in any way, so it formed deep ruts in winter-time. Just across this track was our bit of triangular land. The rest of the land was about ten acres, with furrows running straight east and west, running on a slight down-grade to a valley.

Our triangular piece was at the southern end, wide at the top and going to nothing at the bottom. The farmer, Mr. Edgar Abbot, owned a pair of horses and some farm implements. As an annual routine the whole field would be mucked and ploughed, and all except our triangle was sown with wheat, and when ripe was mowed with a "binder", which automatically cut the wheat and tied up bundles into sheaves, which were then stood up in shocks, each about eight or ten sheaves leaning together, and hoping for plenty of sun to dry them out ready for threshing. The stubble was left to be ploughed in, come winter.

Our patch had long furrows on the north side, lessening to very short ones at the southern corner. This left a regular rectangular field for the farmer, and a handy triangle of land for us to work with hand tools. Down the long south side of our "allotment" stood a row of about ten pollarded elm trees, their knobbly tops in winter at about shoulder height. In autumn the leaves turned bright yellow, and we collected them up to add to a heap of leaf mould handy for mulching or potting. In early spring the fresh

green shoots would cover the pollards, and by autumn they would be covered with good straight branches up to ten feet long.

When all the leaves had fallen and the sap had run down, Dad cut the branches down with a hatchet, which he called a "hook", and whoever was helping, including me, would sort the longest branches to be used as poles for the runner beans; they would be trimmed of all side twigs to allow the beans to wind themselves round the poles. The medium sized branches would be used for pea-sticks, leaving all the side twigs on. Small ones would be kept to dry out for "kindling", to help light fires. Each group we had sorted would be tied up in faggots, using withes, strong flexible lianes culled from the hedgerows. The faggots were stood up in rows leaning into each other, so forming a useful playhouse for us children. The poles and pea-sticks were put in place early over the seedbeds, so the young peas and beans would not have their roots disturbed as they were trying to grow. The thin ends of the poles would also provide stakes when needed in the flower garden, or for tomatoes.

It was my job to train the tomatoes, using a regime which ensured strong stems up to about five feet high. I pinched out all side shoots, until the first bunches of fruit were harvested. Then I would pinch out the top growth and encourage one strong side shoot to take the place of the main stem when all the fruit had been harvested. We hoped the season would allow the new side shoot to develop enough to bear fruit before the first frosts cut them off. Before the frosts could damage the tomatoes, we brought them into the house, where they readily changed from green to red. Mum used to make jars of green tomato and apple chutney, or we enjoyed the green tomatoes fried as a vegetable.

In those "days of old", girls and women were not regarded as suitable for working in the garden. They might perhaps wander round with a basket picking flowers, or perhaps gathering peas and beans; or a woman like Mum might defy custom and tend her flowers. But they should not cut a cabbage, or a lettuce, or a cucumber, or a marrow. That was for "gardeners" proper! On Saturdays it was a man's job to fill up the boxes in the kitchen with potatoes, carrots, turnips, parsnips, celery and such like.

Firewood -- tree-felling

Along the headland of Abbot's field I have been describing ran a wide track for use by farm carts and machinery, and on the other side of the track was a large ditch, used for drainage of the "Back Field", and later took sewage from fifteen dwellings located on Church Walk. It watered the roots of a long line of elm trees along one side of the Back Field, trees which grew up to a hundred feet high. Usually three or four of those trees would be dead or dying, and Dad would ask the farmer's permission to fell one of them and cut it up for firewood. This was a big undertaking, and needed the co-operation of neighbours.