

Site Profile

Northfields Allotments

The Northfield allotments are at the top end of Northfield Avenue, with Mattock Lane along the north side and Occupation Road along the southern side. Prior to 1832, the land where the current allotments are situated, was known as Ealing Dean Common. It was also known as 'Jackass Common' as pony races were held there on holidays. These races were said to have continued until the 1880s, when the local council stopped them because of complaints about the 'evil they encouraged'. In 1832 Charles James Blomfield, the Bishop of London and Lord of the Manor of Ealing, ensured the enclosure of the land for use as allotments. According to Blomfield's biographer Malcolm Johnson, "The Bishop thought that the Church should provide rival attractions, such as mens clubs, and his Ealing allotments laid out in 1832 were an attempt to substitute his beloved gardening for drinking as a pastime."

Through the years, the plots have been managed by a succession of committees, charities and trusts. Today it is held in trust by the charity Pathways. When I sign up new tenants, I have to emphasise we are not a council-run site. They all assume the council will magically turn up to help them clear their plot and deliver compost (I blame Joe Swift, presenter on Gardener's World and one-time allotment tenant, for spreading this myth). Northfields has 71 full-sized plots and 56 half plots. Some people have more than one plot - a throwback from the days when allotments weren't so popular. We currently have 110 tenants and 95 people on the waiting list. In 1832, the Bishop stipulated that each tenant should be allocated no more than one Rood - which is about a quarter of an acre or 10,890 square feet, approximately 1,011 square metres. The rent was five shillings. Today, we only rent out half plots to newcomers - around 6m x 15m = 90 sq m. Tenants pay £120 for a full plot and £66.00 for a half plot.

The big event in 2013 was our new fence. The old fence had so many holes and openings that anyone could easily get on site and, of course, they did. We turned up one day to find all our metal taps had been stolen. They were replaced with plastic ones, which have so far stayed in place. That said, I have always felt it was a safe place. The new fence is two meters high and we now all pay a surcharge of £18.60 per year on top of the yearly rent – for the next 20 years – in order to cover the cost.



Up until 2013 Pathways employed an allotment manager two days a week to oversee Northfields and Haslemere – our sister site. But it became obvious to plot holders that this was too big a job for one person working on a part-time basis. Paths were not maintained, plots were left to get in a terrible state, non-cultivation letters were not enforced and many

plots were not even rented out (even though we had a long waiting list). One plot had been abandoned for so long it was on their spreadsheet as uncultivable. A challenge, as shown above, we couldn't resist. Of course, we also have plot holders who keep their plots well-maintained and are generous with their advice.

So, we started holding impromptu meetings on site and then I launched a private online forum for tenants. The forum became a great way to share information and test opinion – with feedback coming back pretty quickly. Suddenly plot holders who had never spoken to one another had a rallying point and it is not an exaggeration to say we went from being a bunch of individuals to a community – intent on improving the site. Eventually there emerged a small group of troublemakers – I mean concerned citizens – who formed a steering group to move towards self management. Haslemere had also come to the same conclusion about self management. So, together we made representations to Pathways

management team and then their board of Trustees. Back in October, Northfields and Haslemere got the green light to manage their own sites. At the start of 2014, we formed the Ealing Dean Allotment Society; we have a constitution and six elected and one co-opted committee members. We used the name Ealing Dean because the first committee in 1832 was the Ealing Dean Allotment Committee and we wanted to have that link to the past.

We have great plans for the site. But, I have to keep reminding everyone that we won't undo 15 years of neglect overnight. We don't officially take over the management until April 1st, but tenants are already starting to notice the changes. We have started on some general maintenance: clearing the main path of stinging nettles, preparing plots for rental and starting a metal collection and recycling scheme. Many sites run work days – but there doesn't seem to have been any history of them at Northfields. We want people to realise that the committee can't do it all (we all have full time jobs), we need plot holders to volunteer some time too... and they have. That "uncultivable" plot shown above was cleared over three mornings by seventeen volunteers. After that show of support – I knew self management could work. Plot holders and local residents have also answered our call to clear up the footpath that runs between the allotments and the back gardens of Loveday



Road. This path, known as Radbourne Walk, will be cleaned up and replanted with local native plants and annual wildflowers. There will also be habitat creation for the endangered and protected Stag Beetles present on site. We have received support from the local council with volunteer schemes and will receive some financial backing.

Like most sites, we do have a regular turnover of plot holders. While our waiting list will always be run on a first-come, first-served basis, the committee feels we do need to do more to vet new tenants and help them in the initial stages of clearing a plot. With 95 people on the waiting list, we have decided to trial "Nursery Plots". These smaller plots will give the beginner a taste of allotment life. If they thrive, they will move up to a half plot. If they realise that it is not for them – well it only leaves us a small patch of weeds to clear up.

If you look at us on Google maps satellite view you can see that the site is quite long with a central path – The Long Walk – with plots either side. When I first got my plot, I rarely spoke to anyone at the other end of the site. While the forum has been invaluable at bringing us all together, my personal crusade has been to get a communal plot. I'd like to see a composting toilet there and a shed big enough for meetings, courses and social events. We can use the plot for bulk deliveries of compost, recycling and the all-important barbeque. Having an online community is great – but nothing beats a real world burger in a bun and a glass of wine with friends. Although I'm not sure the Bishop would approve!

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