THE PLOTHOLDER
ROYAL PADDocks ALLOTMENTS NEWSLETTER No 13 – May 2002

May at last, and with the growing season under way we welcome 18 new tenants. For this we can thank our publicity machine: Gill Hiley for posters and advertisements, Jackie Dungate for including our site details in the Richmond Leisure Services leaflet beside the local authority’s own sites, and Mary Newing, webster/webmistress of our website. Yes, we’re on line, and Mary writes more about this on page 4.

The Open Day, on Sunday 9 June, from 12.30 to 4 p.m. is another way we raise our profile locally. It’s a chance for enquirers to have a look round at leisure, and meet the community behind the gates. Come and bring your families, friends and neighbours for a friendly and relaxed day in the open air. We’ll have the usual attractions – barbecue, drinks, and we hope tombola, raffle, cakes and produce, and gardening things to buy – it depends on you. Donations of food for the shared lunch are always generous and delicious: please contact any committee member with your offers of help, and keep the date free for the Paddocks.

SUNDAY PARKING TRIAL TO BE EXTENDED  The trial period for Sunday parking, voted in at the AGM, is to be extended for the time being, in line with what the majority want. There are some drawbacks, though: people don’t always stop to close the gates behind them when they leave, which exposes us to the risk of vandalism and theft; and parked cars are sometimes blocking access for other tenants.

THE PLOT HOLDERS’ COMMITTEE HOPE TO REDUCE as far as possible the amount of driving around inside the walls – it’s unsafe for children, and brings in traffic fumes from which the wall partly protects us. So they plan to make a parking space just inside the gate on plot 79 (the one with the shed). To divert patrol vapour from the adjacent plot they will be putting up a fence alongside. At the time of writing they’re trying to get the best price for the fence, which won’t be cheap, and no parking can take place till the fence is in position. Some levelling of the ground must be done too, as at present it’s only suitable for 4-wheel drives.

WE NEED YOU! If you ticked the volunteer section on your enrolment form, you’ll probably be getting a call from Bill Kent, of plot 188, who’s offered to co-ordinate a working party. (Bill introduces himself on page 3.) There’s quite a lot of work involved, so if you’re among those wanting more parking space, please offer your services too. In council-run sites this would all be done by paid workmen, and DIY is what keeps our rents so much lower than theirs. So if we find ourselves thinking ‘They should do something – sort out the car parking, keep the gates shut, get the buildings repaired, whatever’ – the answer is that there’s no them: It’s US. Give Bill a call.

WELCOME TO NEW TENANTS Plum Bowyer (42b), Sandra Dunbar (39f), Alison Gilbert (163), Markus Gilgas (151), Lisa Ledbury (31b), Nicholas Martland (9), Mark Nesbitt and Delwen Samuel (153f), Andrew Norman (140b), Arnette Prestige (139b), Nicola Ramsden (43b), Tristan Rogers and Stefanie Dickinson (129), Susan Turton (155b), Tommy and Graham Walker (145), and Rob and Julie Wyness (128).

... and GOODBYE, sadly, to the Barrons, who won the prize for the Best Newcomers for plot 43b last year. They’ve had to move away from Hampton Wick, but leave their half-plot in good heart for Nicola Ramsden. Wilf Goudie gave up his plot last year because of illness, and we heard from his niece of his death in March. Wilf, who was from Shetland originally, had been a Paddocks tenant for a number of years, and we send our condolences to his family.

GET WELL SOON George Loosmore and Len Hedges, both of whom have had knee operations. George has made it down to the Paddocks on his walking sticks recently, but Len is still recuperating after a serious fall in November. THERE’S NEWS on the back page from Anne Jones, now a plotholder in Epsom.
A REAL BEGINNER? START HERE, WITH SOME ADVICE FROM HANS

We’re delighted with the number of new tenants who’ve joined us this year. Some, we know, are pretty new to gardening, yet have bravely taken on plots which haven’t seen a spade for a long time. Partly with them in mind, the Plotholders’ Committee has bought a couple of mattocks, and two pairs of long-handled loppers, for loan to people clearing overgrown land.

It also seemed a good idea to get advice from Hans van der Meulen, last year’s Cup Winner, about where to start when you’re faced with a bit of a jungle. I put to him a few of the questions we’ve been asked.

I need to get some tools. Which ones can’t I do without? The best spade and fork you can afford, preferably not those with the business end screwed onto a wooden handle, as these always seem to break eventually. A rake and a hoe, trowel, shears, secateurs, and if you have brambles to deal with, leather gloves – B & Q or Homebase have leather gauntlets at around £6 which are almost too good for gardening!

What’s the best way to deal with a bramble patch? Chop it down, pile it up and burn it – it rots too slowly for compost, but burns easily. The roots will have to be dug out (maybe using the new mattocks), and there may be regrowth for a season or two.

My plot is covered with grass. What should I do? On light soil like ours, we need all the organic matter we can get, so don’t waste the turf thatch and the layer of topsoil under it. Double dig, if you can, taking care not to go too deep (say not more than 18 inches) as any deeper will throw up infertile subsoil. Bury the grass roots upside down in each row at that depth, and even couch grass will rot down. If you aren’t strong enough to double dig, cover the area with agricultural plastic for a couple of seasons, which will kill off enough of the growth for you to make a start.

Double digging? What’s that? Take out the first row of turf by cutting out a line of squares with the spade, and laying the resulting cube of soil and grass to one side, in a row. Dig down another 9 inches or so in the resulting trench, and put that soil on top of the first. Move back 6 inches and repeat the operation, putting the new turf upside down into the bottom of the trench you’ve made, and the next layer down on top of them. Repeat till the area’s all been dug, or as for long as you can manage.

What’s couch grass? Unlike most other grasses, it can be hard to get rid of, because it spreads by runners, and from joints in its straight white roots which you can see running through the soil. Even a fragment of couch grass will grow another plant, which is why it all needs to be forked out eventually. However, it dislikes drying out, so if you shake off the soil and spread the roots out in summer, it will die. Burying it deep enough, as described above, will also stop it regrowing.

What about bindweed? Can I bury it? Or compost it? No, unfortunately. The roots can go down about 5 feet, and will grow sideways to come up around a barrier. Unless you use weedkiller, digging it out is the only way to get rid of it. Continually removing the top growth will help to weaken it.

I’ve got some ground cleared and dug. What can I plant or sow in May, June and July? If it isn’t too dry, you could plant potatoes till early June. There probably won’t be any seed potatoes left, so you could put in shop spuds, though as these aren’t virus-proof, don’t make a habit of it. Shop potatoes are often treated to stop them sprouting, so use organic ones. I think Waitrose don’t treat theirs. Courgettes, cucumbers and squash plants will probably still be available, and like potatoes are good plants for suppressing weed growth on a new plot because of the way their leaves shade the ground round them. You can sow radishes all summer. Beetroot and french beans can be sown till mid-July, runner beans till early June. Lettuce can be sown until the hot weather; it won’t germinate if the temperature reaches the 70s. Quite a few annual flower seeds can be sown in early summer, and besides looking good, the flowers will help to attract beneficial insects. When you sow seeds in late spring and summer, water the ground first – watering after seeds are sown, but before they’ve germinated will make a pan of soil hard for new shoots to penetrate. Once they’re [contd]
Introductions  Thanks and welcome to new committee members  The Plotholders’ Committee meets ten times a year, staffs the office, inspects the plots and generally keeps the show on the road. New member Jozef Osten has taken over as treasurer and manager of the Millennium Fund on Mike Veysey’s retirement, and despite recent ill-health he and Sharon are keeping plot 46 well in hand. Jean Blaic (29b, 162) has been a tenant for 11 years, and grows a wide range of crops, including asparagus, squash, broadly and both sorts of artichoke – so far, peanuts and aubergines haven’t succeeded. He likes the friendly atmosphere of the Paddocks, and hopes to see more bramble plots cleared and let; and the buildings project completed ‘sooner rather than later’.

‘It’s a different world inside the gate’, says Marguerite Pocock, a tenant for 32 years. She hopes the site will continue to be well run by its tenants, and that more newcomers will get the same satisfaction she and Chris get from plot 55. They’ve always done well with soft fruit and runner beans, but aim to become self-sufficient in vegetables through the winter.

Bill Kent is our newest recruit, both to the Committee and to the Paddocks, and having volunteered to be maintenance projects organiser, is worth ten pressed men! He writes:

‘I am very new to growing things. I began to get the bug in ’99 when, at the age of 50, I started helping my partner Betty in her garden – she is a very keen and experienced gardener. I was not a gardener then, and am still not now, but I got the jobs that required the Braun. My first and most memorable success was the first crop from a potted gooseberry bush a friend gave us. The joy of picking and savouring each berry was for me a first, and made me decide to grow my own produce! More things to eat! An ALLOTMENT! I had fantasised about having my own allotment for as long as I can remember, and the very word conjured up feelings of security and belonging.

The Royal Paddocks is such a friendly place, and walking through the gate is like stepping back in time to a lost land of peace, birdsong and sunshine, where people greet you with a warm smile and a polite comment or two, not to mention a delicately-delivered piece of advice.

My hopes for the site are simple: that it remains a pleasant relaxing place away from the bustle of everyday life. I am a new boy, but I realise how important it is that we all pull together. There are areas for improvement, as we all know. We are a self-running unit, and these improvements can only be achieved by ourselves. We all need to get involved, no use criticising or complaining. Come and help – you can contact me on plot 188, or by phone on 8977 1056, and email tmg@tinyworld.co.uk. Looking forward to hearing from you – Bill.

[continued from page 2] through, water when they need it.

What are the main predators I need to guard against? Pigeons can be pretty destructive, but you can keep them off the greens by stringing cotton round the plants. Crows sometimes pull up onions and broad beans, and will eat corn cobs, and small birds love currants. But I wish the fox would get that pheasant! It’s been pulling leaves off my cabbages and making a real mess – the cotton doesn’t put him off. The biggest problem is slugs. I do use pellets, in small amounts, at a distance from the plants. But keeping the area tidy, and the grass short, and coming down often in the early morning to pick them off, can really help.

Any tips about weeding? Weed germination can be very thick on ‘new’ ground. There’s no real substitute for handweeding, but you can save a lot of time by using a hoe regularly between the rows, before the weeds get big. And you don’t have to bend over.

Speaking of which, my back hurts. Yes, like any other form of exercise, gardening uses muscles you maybe didn’t know you had! Energy-wise, it’s more or less the equivalent of aerobics. Try to do a little, often, and break yourself in gently – which is better for the plants, too, rather than a blitz once a fortnight.

I’m at work all week. What’s the least amount of time I can put in and still make a difference? The thing to remember is that the time spent on the plot should be a pleasure. So don’t take on too much ground – half a plot is plenty for a busy person who’s also a beginner. And grow things you like eating, and which are easy – potatoes taste good, and are really rewarding to dig up. To get satisfaction from the plot, you need to make a regular commitment, but if you do you may find you’re hooked! Good luck! Hans.
21st CENTURY ARRIVES – THE PADDOCKS ON-LINE  Mary Newing

reports: For some time now the Royal Paddocks Allotments have had a website, managed by me, and hosted within my allocated space supported by my Internet Service Provider. This means we have a rather strange web address, but it works! You can find us at www.bitinternet.com/mary.newing/paddocks/

The main purpose of our website is to advertise our allotments and attract more keen gardeners. To date we have let at least two plots because of the website, and I'm now starting to receive requests via email. In addition to information for new members we also have useful information for existing gardeners. On the website you can find an archive of all our newsletters, as well as information on coming events.

Our website has been incorporated into the Vegetable Gardening and Allotment Ring. We can also be found by searching uk.yahoo.com, and we have links from the Richmond Borough website. Fame at last for the Royal Paddocks Allotments!

If anyone has a personal website dedicated to their allotment let me know, and I will add you to the main site as a link. If you can contribute anything to the website, then please get in touch with me at mar. newing@yahoo.co.uk.

The Vegetable Gardening and Allotment Ring has fascinating links to an enormous number of other allotment and environmental-interest sites, and makes you realise what a great movement we are a part of. Thanks to Mary for joining us on to it. Editor.

A GRADUATE WRITES BACK  Anne Jones took on plot 150 on our first Open Day back in June 2000, and wrote about her first few months in that October's newsletter. She left us with great regret this spring - but she hasn't lost the plot! She wrote to us from Epsom:

IS THERE LIFE AFTER ROYAL PADDOCKS ALLOTMENTS? After only one full season I've had to move on. So many seeds unsown, so many crops unsown! But I started looking for my next plot even before we'd moved into the new house. I'm now the proud tenant of a smaller, flatter and emptier plot, and it's back to the drawing board with my (over)ambitious plans: at the latest count over 20 different seed packets - well, the pictures on them are so appealing...

What will I do differently this time? Grow fewer radishes: I had three 10ft rows last year, and there's not much you can do with radishes after eating them raw in salads or grating them into a stir-fry. I'll grow more leafy things - I was always jealous of the spinach and chards I saw spring up last year. And I want more exotic greenery for salads.

Beetroot and potatoes were my big successes. I couldn't keep up with my 8-year-old's passion for beetroot, his favourite vegetable (and perhaps mine). I plan many more rows this year. The potatoes have fed us well over six months, and kept the weeds down in the newly-dug area, as a fellow plotholder assured me they would.

Getting my plot in Epsom was easy. I chose the closest to me, which happens to be council-run. Joining involved an official document signed by the council lawyer, which I also signed and had to have witnessed! My new plot was covered with short grass: many are not well cared for, and the council clear any that get too bad, though mowing tends to mask the weed problem. My half is about the same as a half at the Paddocks, but costs £15 a year.

We have one excellent perk: free manure from the Epsom stables. Disposing of the manure is clearly a headache for the trainers and the council, and it's delivered in sacks each week. We also get ash in bulk, which is said to work against slugs - we'll see.

It's perhaps too soon to comment on how the site is run, but it certainly isn't self-run like the Paddocks - there's no 'heart' to it, no seed store, and no machinery. But the few people I have met have been very welcoming and encouraging.

I'm very sad to hand my key back to Susan, and I'd like to thank everyone for introducing me to the fascinating world of allotments, and for always giving me such positive advice and encouragement. I will miss you all. Anne

Keep in touch through the website, Anne, and good luck!

To contribute to The Plotholder contact Susan Saunders, 8977 4675. Letters and contributions welcome.