



OF CABBAGES AND KINGS: THE HISTORY OF ALLOTMENTS

by Caroline Foley

Frances Lincoln, £20
ISBN 978-0711234093

A dig through a thousand years of history examining why allotments came into existence and those that fought for them.

Reviewer Caroline Beck is a garden writer.

The history of allotments is also the history of the ability of the poor to feed themselves. But although nearly a third of a million of us have one, thankfully we rarely need it to stop us from starving. But this is a relatively recent occurrence and in Caroline Foley's well-researched book, she reaches back to 1066 to examine the roots of this uniquely British phenomenon. It's stirring stuff. Violent spats between landowners and the landless poor erupt down through centuries – the Peasants' Revolt of 1381; the rebellious 'Levellers' of 1649 squatting on private land, growing food and declaring 'the land belongs to everyone'; the Chartists and the Peterloo Massacre of 1819; through to allotment legislation after the First World War to help returning servicemen feed themselves. These parcels of land arose out of the state's need to keep the labouring poor 'occupied, grateful and sober

and reduce the burdensome poor rates' and then became enshrined in legislation as a necessity and a right.

The book shows the rapid, mass migration of the poor from the countryside to the cities throughout the 19th century, which led to the urban allotment, the haunt of miners and factory workers, land which later became so vital to feeding the nation during the Second World War. Then, in the era of cheap food, allotments were abandoned, the land snapped up by developers until we woke up in the 1990s and realised how much we still need them.

Foley subtly illuminates the character of allotment holders who, even now, are born contrarians. After reading it I feel I know why. Allotment waiting lists are longer than ever. While you wait and plan your plot I suggest you read this book. You will never again underestimate how precious and precarious a stake in the land is.

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