

"Inclosure came and trampled on the grave

Of labour's rights ..."

John Clare

1793 -1864



Berridge Eve - Trustee of The Poors Land of Trimley St. Martin

When I viewed Yvonne Smart's excellent plot on the St. Martin's Allotments earlier this year, my curiosity about these productive green areas was awakened and since then I have found myself wondering how and when they had originated. I spoke to various people who made general observations but the overwhelming consensus of opinion was, "Berridge is the person you need to speak to!" Consequently, I set off to contact this gentleman and bumped into him early one morning when I was out for a walk with a friend. We had a very brief discussion, followed up by one or two emails, and the net result was he agreed to tell me everything he knows about the Poors Land, as it is called.

Berridge proved to be a man whose mind embraces many interests and just about everything he mentioned resulted in a conversational detour. From Trimley St. John, Neolithic axe heads and coprolite mining in Trimley to the wider arching interest of Landscape Archaeology, he is your man for all things earthbound in St. Martin's. He explained how he became involved with the unique area of land called the Poors Land and the role it plays in the village. He had been a Parish Councillor for a while when he heard the Allotments required a Trustee. Attracted by the practical requirements of this post, he put his name forward and quickly found himself the Treasurer of the charity.

At this point the discussion segued smoothly to the early 1800s when the Lord of the Manor, George Nassau, moved to enclose the lands in the parishes of Trimley St. Mary, Trimley St. Martin, Kirton and Nacton. This was the period of the French Wars when the cost of wheat and imported cereals bread was at a premium. Bread, the main component of workers' diets was expensive. Many landholders enclosed their land during this period, partly because it was an opportunity to rationalise land apportionment and productivity. Parliamentary Enclosure had been occurring across Great Britain since the 17th century and was used by many landholders to consolidate land into larger and more economically viable units. The needs of Lord of the Manor and the Freeholders of St. Martin's were of prime importance but the necessities of other tenants had to be considered. Almost inevitably the right to use common land for such activities as grazing and fuel collection was affected and the Landowner

would often provide new or alternative rights to compensate for the loss of the old. When the Enclosure Act for Trimley St. Martin was passed on 13th November 1807 the creation of the Poors Land was granted for the assistance of the Poor of the parish. Enclosure was the most significant change to village land since 1066 and was to remain so until the coming of the railway line to Felixstowe in 1877.

Berridge explained the Poors Land was, and is, a charity. It is a comparatively small plot of land, whose size was established at the time of Enclosure. The Enclosure Award Map states it was 4 acres, 2 roods and 12 perches in size and these measurements are clearly visible on the map. (To put the size of this land into context, 40 Acres was regarded as just slightly above subsistence level farming for small tenant landholders supporting themselves and their family.) At the junction of what is now Mill Lane and Mill Close, stood a handsome windmill with a small track leading to the Poor's Land; this has not changed since 1807 and is still the official entrance to the land.

Land usage was not specified in the Enclosure Act; it was simply required to raise revenue. Although its function is now allotments, this was not necessarily the case when it was first established. The requirement was that the profits from the land should be used to provide coals or "*such other fuel*" for the poor residing in the parish. A Commission into the various Charities in England and Wales between 1819 and 1837 found the following:

"An allotment of four acres of land, set out for the Poor on an enclosure in the parish in 1808, is let by the Churchwardens and Overseers to Abraham Cooke, at the yearly rent of £10, being the full value; and the rent is laid out in the purchase of coals, which are distributed among the poor at Christmas yearly, in quantities according to the size and necessities of families."

The same rent is recorded for the land in 1844 in White's Directory for Suffolk and it's clear the land was being used by an individual and not as allotments. Berridge explained the changes to how the land was deployed came about gradually; it has been used as revenue raising allotments from at least 1966; he is uncertain of their use during and after the Second World War.

Currently, allotment holders pay a rent of either £12 or £17 a year, depending on the size of their holding, thereby generating money for the poor and needy of the parish. You can see from these charges the income is not likely to be huge and it falls to the Trustees to use and invest the money wisely. Originally, the Rector and the Churchwardens were involved as administrators but this has changed over the years. The Poors Land is now registered with the Charities Commission and its stated aim is that the...

"Income (is) applied as the Trustees think fit for the benefit either of the Poor of the Parish of Trimley St. Martin generally or of such poor persons resident therein as they select."

Berridge, the Treasurer, is one of five Trustees for the Charity. The others include the Chair, who is always the Vicar, currently, Rev. Caroline Allen. There are two members of the Parish Council, Yvonne Smart and Carol Garrett and one co-opted general member, Peter Benbow, who is also an allotment holder. These five people are the decision makers and if any of them should get a request for help, it is their duty as Trustees to meet. The main requirement for a grant is that the recipient is a

resident of the village. Rather than cite examples of the requests St. Martin's Trustees have received and thereby invade individuals' privacy, I looked for similar donations supplied from other Poors Land Trustees in different parts of Suffolk. In Corton, north of Lowestoft, someone received assistance for chiropody treatment, a necessity for those suffering from Diabetes; in Kirkley, also near Lowestoft, a very small grant was offered to needy students. A further example was someone on a minimum budget who required help purchasing a set of pans for a new home. The sums available in St. Martin's parish are usually no more than two figures but for needy individuals they provide a welcome relief. It is easy to suppose everyone has everything they need in contemporary Britain but this is not the case as the very existence of Food Banks demonstrates.

Berridge told me the Trustees are always fair and equable distributors of the largesse provided through their small, finite pots of money. It is important that anyone thinking of applying for a modest grant must observe the correct channels when submitting their requests. If you are interested and consider yourself eligible, a formal letter of application should be sent to one the Trustees. It may be applicants need assistance phrasing their letter and if this is the case, they could consider contacting an organisation such as Citizens Advice in Felixstowe for practical help. Alternatively, you may think someone you know needs some financial support, in which case it might be sensible to approach the Vicar, The Rev. Allen. The reserves of the Poors Land are not vast and mighty but they may give an extra help to people struggling to make ends meet.

I was grateful Berridge took time to explain the charity to me and through the medium of this blog, I am extending the information to others. There is something satisfying about sustaining a commoner's right to land which is then utilised by keen horticulturalists to raise money to assist people in need of support. Two hundred years of judicious husbandry has contributed to the sustenance of parishioners in times of need.

Here's to another two centuries of providing necessary help when it is required.



Allotment on the Poors Land, 2018

If you have any comments or observations, you may contact me at:

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LR 28/07/2018