

Urban Food Production in Irish cities during World War 1

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Abstract

In the early 20th century people in Ireland, particularly in urban areas, were dependent on imported food. Due to the First World War and an increasing threat posed by blockades at sea more 'Home-grown food' was required. The State and local voluntary organisations had already initiated programmes to promote small scale food production in cities in Ireland. In January 1917 the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) and the Local Government Board (LGB) introduced schemes to promote food production in Ireland, one of which was the promotion of allotments. The provisions were acquisition of land, loans to purchase seed, supply of requisites, and instruction for allotment holders. These provisions were implemented by city authorities in Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Waterford and Limerick. Those engaged in this small scale production were in casual labour, or employed as brewery workers, teachers, policemen, artisans, gardeners and other trades. Allotment holders formed local committees, which ran their allotment site and interacted with city authorities. Fixity of tenure was a main objective of their representative organisation, the Irish Plotters' Union which was formed in 1917. Potatoes and green vegetables such as onions, carrots and cabbage were cultivated. Contemporary horticulturists provided professional expertise and government officials and politicians attended events which acknowledged and supported the allotment movement. In 1917 an estimated 1875-2,000 ac (750-800 ha) valued at £150,000-£160,000 (€169,500-€180,800) were in cultivation and this figure rose to 2250 ac (910 ha) with a higher estimated value of £400,000 (€452,000) in 1918. Indirect benefits attributed to the allotments were improved health, manual exercise, a new pastime and social interaction. The sources for this research were documents from the DATI, contemporary reports in national and local newspapers and horticultural periodicals of the period.

Keywords: Food Production; World War 1; Ireland; vegetables; allotments.

During World War 1 (1914-1918) food production was identified by the Vacant Land Cultivation Society as a war effort second only to the work of the Red Cross¹. When established in Dublin (Ireland) in 1910 the Society provided those in casual employment with allotments or plots of land on which they could cultivate vegetables for their families. With the outbreak of World War 1 food supply for the urban population caused increasing concern. In the early 20th century foodstuffs for human and animal consumption valued at £24 million (€27,120,000) were imported to Ireland from "every quarter of the globe"². In July 1915 a Committee appointed by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) met to discuss increased "Food Production in a time of War" when food was scarce and likely to become more scarce and expensive³. In the cities of Belfast and Dublin, the provision of allotments by voluntary organisations with the support of local authorities expanded during 1914 and 1915 with significant developments in 1917. Addressing the Council of Agriculture in November 1916, the Vice President of the DATI, Right Hon. T.W. Russell, stated that the "necessity for a greatly increased production of home-grown becomes more insistent" and he intimated that measures to increase food production were to be introduced⁴. The reference was to the Food Production Scheme which in January 1917 was established at the behest of the Food Controller in London and implemented by the DATI and Local Government Board (LGB) in Dublin. At that time the island of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom.

Drawing on Annual General Reports of the DATI, Proceedings of the Council of Agriculture, contemporary reports in national and local newspapers and horticultural periodicals of the period this paper examines the provision of allotments in Irish cities. It investigates the implementation of the terms of the Food Production Scheme - acquisition of land, loans to purchase seed, supply of requisites and instruction for allotment holders. How these provisions were implemented by city authorities in Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Waterford and Limerick. Which persons engaged in this small scale production, their interaction with city authorities and the development of an allotment holders' union. It also examines what was cultivated, what were the crop yields and did they have a monetary value and impact food supply? Finally it reviews

support given to the allotment movement by contemporary horticulturists, government officials and politicians.

Development of Allotments in Irish Cities

The earliest reference to a large scale provision of allotments in an Irish city dates from Belfast in 1907. Initiated by a solicitor, Mr Charles Black, who was familiar with allotments in Manchester, England, allotments for working men were developed in the Strandtown district of Belfast⁵. Organised by the Garden Plots Association on behalf of the Belfast Christian Civic Union, the numbers of allotments expanded from 25 in 1907 to 200 in 1911 to 530 in 1915⁶.

Following a lecture in Dublin by Mr. Joseph Fels of Philadelphia on the topic of land cultivation by the unemployed, the Vacant Land Cultivation Society as it became known, was formed in 1909. Plots of land were lent to the Society, which in turn prepared the ground for cultivation and provided seeds, plants and tools for plotheolders, as the allotment holders were colloquially known. A grant of £50 (€56) to employ an instructor was received from the DATI. In their first year they provided 19 plots in three locations in the city⁷. In the following years the Society provided some 26-36 plots, increasing in 1914 when Dublin Corporation provided land for 50 plots. In 1916 the VLCS had nearly 300 plots and wanted to acquire more suitable land⁸.

Food Production Scheme

With the increasing threat to food supply caused by hostilities at sea a Food Production Scheme was initiated by the DATI and the LGB in January 1917. The Scheme was in two parts: Scheme A, for “holdings over £10 valuation” and Scheme B, for “holdings of £10 valuation, or under, labourers’ plots, and town and other allotments”. The provisions relating to allotments were: “1. Loans for the purchase of seed and manure”; “2. Acquisition of land for allotments”; “4. Measures for making available supplies of seeds, manures, spraying materials and implements” and “6. Instruction as to management and cultivation”⁹. The implementation of the Scheme by the DATI from 1917-1923 is described in Forrest¹⁰.

The details of the Scheme were explained in a letter issued by the LGB to all urban district councils on 3 January 1917. A council could lease land for four years in or adjacent to the town for the purpose of renting allotments to workmen resident in the district. The costs incurred by the Scheme would be recouped by the rent of the allotments, such rates of rent to be fixed by the council. The LGB would sanction loans to defray the cost of the Scheme, the purchase of seed potatoes by occupiers of land and allotment holders. Each council was to form a subcommittee, known as a Land Cultivation Committee, to oversee the Scheme¹¹. Addressing a public meeting in the City Hall Waterford in January 1917, Mr. T.P. Gill, Secretary of the DATI, estimated an upper figure of 3000 acres (1214 ha) for town allotments in the coming year with 250 (101 ha) in Belfast, 150 acres (60.7 ha) in Dublin and 20 acres (8 ha) in other towns with a value of £240,000 (€271,200) being ‘added to the food supply of towns’¹².

Each council provided land from within its own building land bank, or rented land from local landowners either by agreement or by compulsory acquisition. A council then rented allotments, generally one eighth of an acre (505sq m), for eleven months to those resident in the district. In Belfast the LGB decided to let portions of land of parks, football pitches, golf links and cricket pitches for cultivation¹³. The DATI report for 1916–1917 stated that there were 5000 plots in Belfast in that year¹⁴. The DATI grant aided allotments in Belfast in 1917 while no further grants were made the Garden Plots Association had 4634 plots in the city in 1919¹⁵. In Dublin the VLCS continued to provide plots and as did Dublin Corporation’s Land Cultivation Committee on land designated for housing. In June 1917 there were 2,000 plots in Dublin, a figure which increased the following year to 2,800 allotments on 410 acres (166 ha)¹⁶. By February 1917 an Allotment Committee had been established in Limerick, 165 plots were acquired and 158 applications for plots had been received¹⁷. While in Waterford the Food

Production Committee, together with property of the Corporation and two rented sites could provide 146 plots¹⁸. In Cork land was given rent free or rented at £4 (€4.72) per acre (0.4 ha) (€11.8 per ha)¹⁹. With the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) land could be compulsorily acquired by the LGB. In Cork newspaper reports carried detailed information about such an inquiries with an outcome of lands in or adjacent to city wards being rented at £7 (€7.91) per acre (€17.77 per ha)²⁰. From available information, Table 1 gives the numbers of allotments in each city in the years 1914–1918.

Table 1 *Number of allotments in Irish cities during World War 1*

City	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
Dublin	50+		300	1194-1235	2800
Belfast	400	530		5000	
Cork			272	320	± 1000
Limerick				165	
Waterford				146	

Source: Table prepared from DATI and newspaper reports.

The rent to ploholders varied from city to city or from site to site within a city. In Dublin they paid six shillings and eight pence (€0.37) for one eighth of an acre (505sq m)²¹. While in Limerick, where the costs of renting land varied the Allotment Association in 1918 agreed a rent per plot of 13s (€0.73) for the season²².

The Food Production scheme also allowed for the provision of seeds, manure and other requisites. In Dublin the Land Cultivation Committee procured 60 tons of seed potatoes, while manure was provided by the Corporation's Cleansing Department²³. In Waterford three suppliers were paid £62 2s 6d (€72) for seed potatoes and garden tools were provided to allotment holders²⁴.

Instruction was also offered to ploholders. In Belfast from 1912 the Municipal Technical Institute provided lectures, a monthly diary of garden operations and demonstration plots²⁵. Similar activities were supported by the DATI and Land Cultivation Committees in Dublin and later in Cork. With regard to Dublin the DATI paid the salary of James Hurley, an instructor previously working for the VLCS. In addition the Land Cultivation Committee appointed an instructor to allocate the plots and six temporary instructors to advise on Saturday afternoons and holidays²⁶. In their Annual General Reports the DATI stated that they had provided instruction for allotment holders. In 1917 classes in gardening were held in technical schools in Belfast, Cork Waterford and Dublin, among others; 60,000-70,000 copies of a leaflet *Cultivation of Allotments*, was distributed and 200-400 people attended lectures in Dublin and Belfast²⁷. Lectures were given by DATI staff employed in horticultural colleges or as advisors. By March 1917 it was reported that Cork ploholders directed by instructors had become skilled at growing green vegetables and potatoes²⁸.

Who were the ploholders?

Though initially established for casual workers, during years of World War 1 ploholders included policemen, brewery employees, teachers, labourers and working gardeners. Some women also worked allotments²⁹. The ploholders formed themselves into local committees or associations and representatives of these committees became members of a council's Land Committee. The local committees also lobbied on behalf of ploholders. In October 1917

members of the VLCS and representatives of allotment sites in Dublin, Limerick and other parts of Ireland met with the Chief Secretary to request fixity of tenure for plotheholders and sufficient land for food production as was the situation in England and Scotland. He agreed to give the matter careful consideration³⁰. Fixity of tenure was one of the reasons for the formation of the Irish Plotheholders' Union in 1917³¹. The matter of fixity of tenure continued to be discussed by the DATI, city councils and plotheholders during and after World War I. Eventually the Irish Free State government passed the Acquisition of Lands (Allotments) Act 1926 and the Amendment of 1934 required local authorities to provide allotments for the employed, unemployed and the blind³².

Plotheholders became involved in local politics. In 1918 a member of the Limerick Plotheholders' Association was put forward as a candidate for co-option as a councillor for the Shannon Ward³³.

What crops were cultivated by the plotheholders?

In Belfast plotheholders were required to grow at least four kinds of vegetables and a flower border of sweet pea, annuals and perennials³⁴. Potatoes were the principal crop promoted by Food Production Scheme. Mr. John Griffin, Chief Allotment Inspector, Cork, recommended the potato varieties, Arran Chief, British Queen and Leinster Wonder³⁵.

Newspaper reports of exhibitions of allotment produce list the wide range of vegetable grown by some plotheholders. At an exhibition held at the Claremont Institution, Glasnevin, in aid of the Irish Counties War Hospital, celery, parsnips, carrots, onions, beetroot, cabbages and marrow grown in the Comfrey Field Allotments, Glasnevin were on display³⁶. The produce from this and other exhibitions was distributed to military hospitals or charitable organisations.

Yield and monetary value of crops cultivated by plotheholders

In general a plot would yield sufficient vegetables for a family of five for a year and potatoes for six months³⁷. In January 1917 at a lecture to promote the recently introduced urban allotments scheme, Mr. W.D. Johns, estimated that the cost to the individual plot holder was 30 shillings (€1.69) and their profit an estimated £8 (€9) or £9 (€10.2)³⁸. Information about the costs and return on the plots was also recorded in newspapers. In 1916 the rent of a plot varied from 6s (€0.33) to 16s (€0.90). The example was given of a brewery employee with an eighth of an acre plot, (505 sq. m) who produced crops to the value of 2s (€0.11) per week. His gross return was £13 13s 6d (€15.49) per year, or £100 (€113) per acre. Expenses were £2 5s (€2.55) exclusive of labour and his surplus crops were sold for £9 11s 6d (€11.75)³⁹.

Support for the allotment movement

Newspaper reports record the involvement of local politicians, churchmen, government officials and notable horticulturists in public events associated with these food production schemes. In March 1917 in Cork, the Lord Mayor, Sir Edward Fitzgerald and the Bishop of Cork were present when plots were formally handed over to 50 people, who were busy planting potatoes⁴⁰.

The allotment movement had the support of the DATI not only through grants and various forms of instruction but its senior officials attended exhibitions of allotment produce. The Vice President of the DATI, Right Hon. T.W. Russell officiated at the presentation of prizes held in the Leo Hall, Inchicore, Dublin, in 1916⁴¹. His colleague, Sir Frederick Moore, Keeper of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, had visited the allotment sites and commented that 'the cultivation of the various crops ... reflect the greatest credit on those responsible for organising and instructing the holders and also on the holders themselves'. In 1917 Mr J.W. Besant, Assistant Curator of the RBG Glasnevin and Mr. L. J. Humphrey, School Gardens Instructor of the DATI were the judges of prizes of £2 2s (€2.37) to 5s (€0.28) per person to holders of plots under the care of the Dublin Corporation Land Cultivation Committee⁴². Mr. T.P. Gill,

Secretary of the DATI, spoke in support of allotments at many events. Opening the VLCS exhibition in 1917, he stated that the exhibits 'showed splendid and attractive food'. Mr William Field M.P., an early member of the VLCS, commented that this show 'proved what could be accomplished by the allotment system to increase food production'⁴³.

Outcomes of the Food Production Scheme

Was food production increased by the allotment system? Despite the provision of land at a low rent, comprehensive supports of requisites and instruction the upper estimate mentioned earlier by Mr. T.P. Gill of the DATI returns valued at £240,000 (€271,200) from 3,000 ac (1214 ha) did not materialise. Speaking in Waterford in June 1917 Mr T.P. Gill of the DATI estimated that there were 15,000 – 16,000 allotments in the country with produce valued at £150,000-£160,000 (€169,500-€180,800).⁴⁴ (Allowing for one eighth of an acre, that would equate to 1875-2,000 ac (750-800ha) or £80 (€90.40) per acre (€226 per ha). In September 1917, Gill gave a similar value to the 75 allotments schemes in the country⁴⁵. In the provision of allotments costs were incurred by a local authority. In Dublin for example the charges of the Land Cultivation Committee were £2,620 14s 7d, (€2961) with a deficit of £309 0s 5d (€349) which was due to be recouped in the following year⁴⁶. The area under allotments increased to 2,250 acres (910 ha) in 1918 with an estimated price of £400,000 (€452,000) which 'gave an idea of value to working classes in towns'⁴⁷.

As well as the direct benefits of the food production scheme indirect benefits occurred also. Open air activities, manual exercise, a new found interest and 'good-fellowship between ploholders and 'a higher civic spirit' were identified as health and societal benefits of the allotment movement⁴⁸. At a VLCS exhibition of produce Mr. T.P. Gill spoke of the benefits of the plots for the individual, the town dweller and the development of an understanding between rural and urban dwellers⁴⁹. Similar exhibitions were held in London where in 1918, 4883 allotments were cultivated⁵⁰. In Scotland, Glasgow Corporation allotments numbered 4,500 in 1917 with a total of 8,000 around the city⁵¹.

Ploholders invested their resources of time and money into maintaining a plot and reaped the rewards of fresh vegetables and the skills gained in their cultivation. Newspapers reports recorded the names of individuals who won prizes in awards for allotment sites and exhibitions of produce. Several named ploholders were office holders in their local allotment association. However, no personal reminiscences of those who 'worked the plots' were located. Before World War 1 voluntary groups identified the potential of allotments to provide food for unemployed city dwellers and proceeded to provide allotments for them. The provisions of the 1917 food production scheme were implemented in detail by local authorities in Ireland, producing vegetables valued at £150,000-£160,000 (€169,500-€180,800). For the 15,000-16,000 ploholders, each would have cultivated vegetables to a value of £10 (€13), a small but significant sum at a time of food shortages. The financial outlay by the DATI and the LGB in supporting these allotments has not been taken into account. The Food Production scheme was a response from Government to threatened food shortages caused by a world war. Cultivation of vegetables was a response from ploholders urban dwellers to this treat. Such local food production has been a hidden aspect of the social life of urban dwellers in early 20th century Irish towns and cities.

Postscript

While World War 1 ended in November 1918 the measures taken to promote food production were extended in Ireland and the DATI continued to support allotments until 1923 when its powers expired and it withdrew from providing allotments⁵². At which time Departments of Agriculture were established by the newly formed governments in the Irish Free State and in Northern Ireland.

Acknowledgements

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