

# A Market Gardener's Plat Perspective

## By Stefan Drew

*Note from Barbara F.: Stefan contacted me and explained his interests in, and research on, the plats. It's nice to have a different perspective and to make new discoveries. Stefan very kindly wrote this short piece for the Branscombe Newsletter. A longer article that Stefan has written can be found:*

<https://www.bitesizedgardening.co.uk/cliff-fields-plats-and-quillets-in-westcountry-garden-history/how-to-dig-for-victory/>

**Stefan:** I started my market gardening career just as the last plat market gardener retired. Now that I've also retired, I'm able to view the plats as a market gardener and, perhaps, bring a perspective that others cannot.

There is no doubt that the Branscombe and Weston plats are a piece of history, unique to Devon. The Cornish had their quillets, Jersey had their cõtils but only Branscombe had plats. But how are they unique?

Certainly the early crops made them very special but the potatoes they grew were the same varieties as many others grew across the UK. Varieties such as Epicure and King Edwards. Epicure potatoes were first sold by Suttons of Torquay in 1897. Even today they are known as a variety that provides a good yield and quickly recovers from frost. Frosts weren't common on the plats but this would have made them a good variety for growing in colder years.

Other potato varieties grown on the plats included Arran Chief, British Queen and Sharpes Express, the last two appearing in 2024 seed catalogues.

Thanks to our local historians we know what vegetables Tom White grew in 1943, he recorded it in a notebook and they published them as part of the Branscombe Project. Tom grew crops such as Bedfordshire Champion onions and Hollow Crown parsnips and both are still in today's seed catalogues.

Despite the National Trust sign at Weston saying that the plats were to keep the local men occupied, we know the plats were never about leisure. In this case being "occupied", kept them from starvation.

Market gardening is extremely hard work with long hours and poor returns and as a market gardener something has always troubled me about the plats. Plat farmers were clearly inventive and highly skilled. So why did they never mechanise?

I know the arguments about steep cliff sides and narrow paths. But I had a Honda pedestrian tractor that could go up any slope a man or donkey could climb. And with adjustable axles it was as narrow as a donkey!

So despite the donkeys and lack of historical evidence I was never convinced. And now I have evidence to show that at least one plat was mechanised. Nestled deep in the undergrowth on Weston plat I found the remains of a pedestrian tractor that could have been used to plough, cultivate, haul a small trailer and a host of other tasks. Experts have examined the photographs I sent them and tell me it is an Auto Culto model E or F. The engine was a Villiers and would have been 250 or 350cc depending on the model. They were manufactured between 1932-39 and I'm now researching the retailers selling them locally from 1932 onwards.

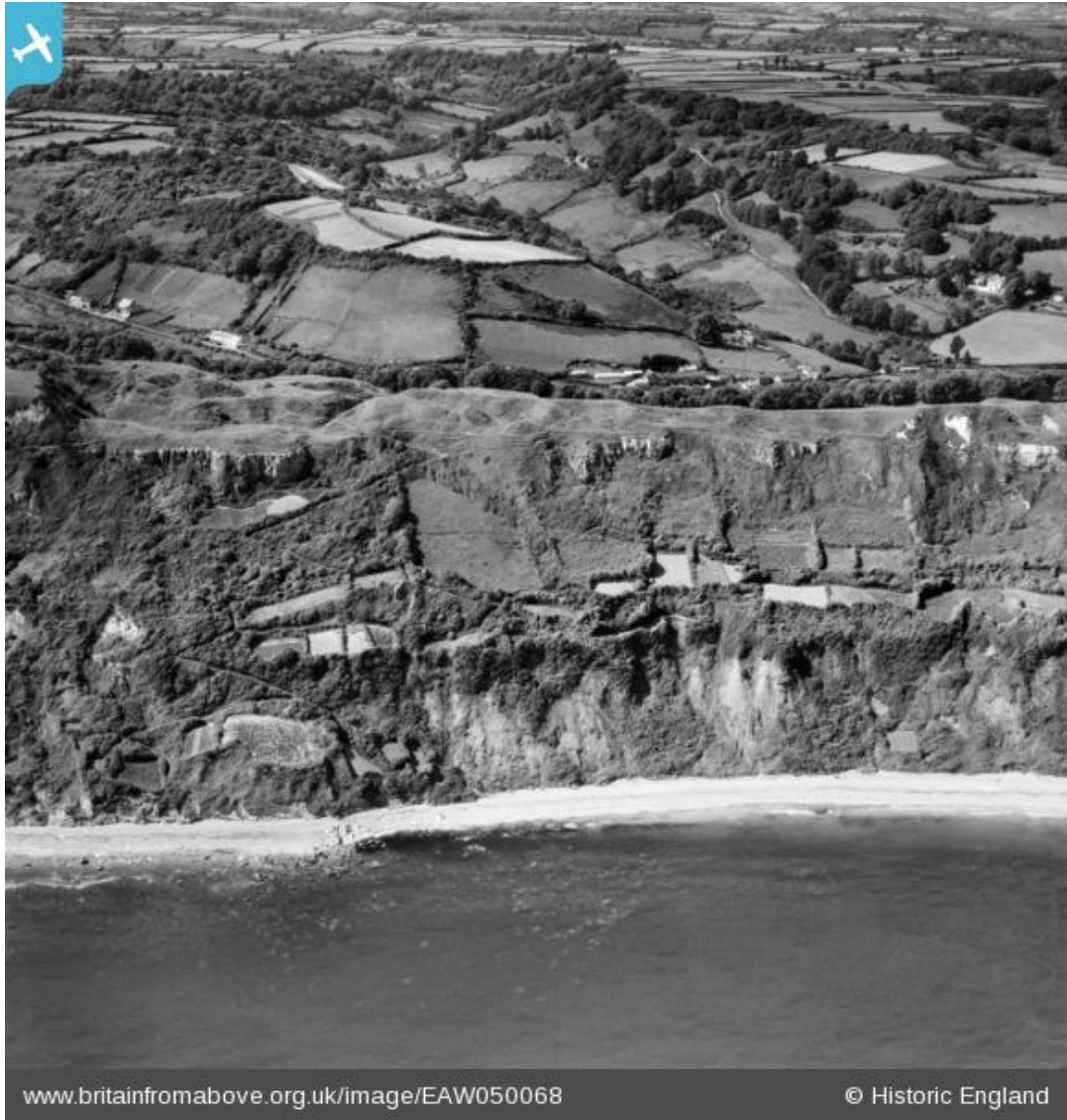


Plat history spans the centuries but can still teach us much today. They've prompted me to learn more and I frequently post plat observations on my gardening website:

[BiteSizedGardening.co.uk](http://BiteSizedGardening.co.uk)



*Photo credit: Britain from Above  
1953  
Cultivation plots (plats) near Branscombe Ebb*



*Photo credit: Britain from Above  
1953  
Cultivation plots (plats) Branscombe*