

Much is already known about allotments that existed in the village in the past. I thank those who previously worked on this and gave me much background on the subject.

I was given an opportunity to examine the Parish Council Minutes Books and these gave me a very detailed insight into the formation of the village allotments in the late 1800s into the 1920s. This in turn encouraged me to look at any maps we might have and what they showed of allotments in the past. I thought the subject was worth revisiting. I am aware there were other village allotments but my focus is on those let by the Parish Council from its early days.



Thomas Rendell at Miller's Lea

Above is what we might consider a typical allotment - flat, with orderly rows of produce and sheltered by a wall, fence, hedge or suchlike.

Things were done a little differently in Branscombe in the past, with plots cultivated on the cliff face. These photos show the angle of some of the plats, as they were known. When these photos were taken this industry was past its peak, but, nevertheless, many men were still busy growing early crops in the favourable microclimate there. The earliness made possible a precarious living, selling early potatoes and other crops. The men were known as cliff farmers.

Plats
1953



1953



Cliffy
Gosling
one of
the last
died
1966

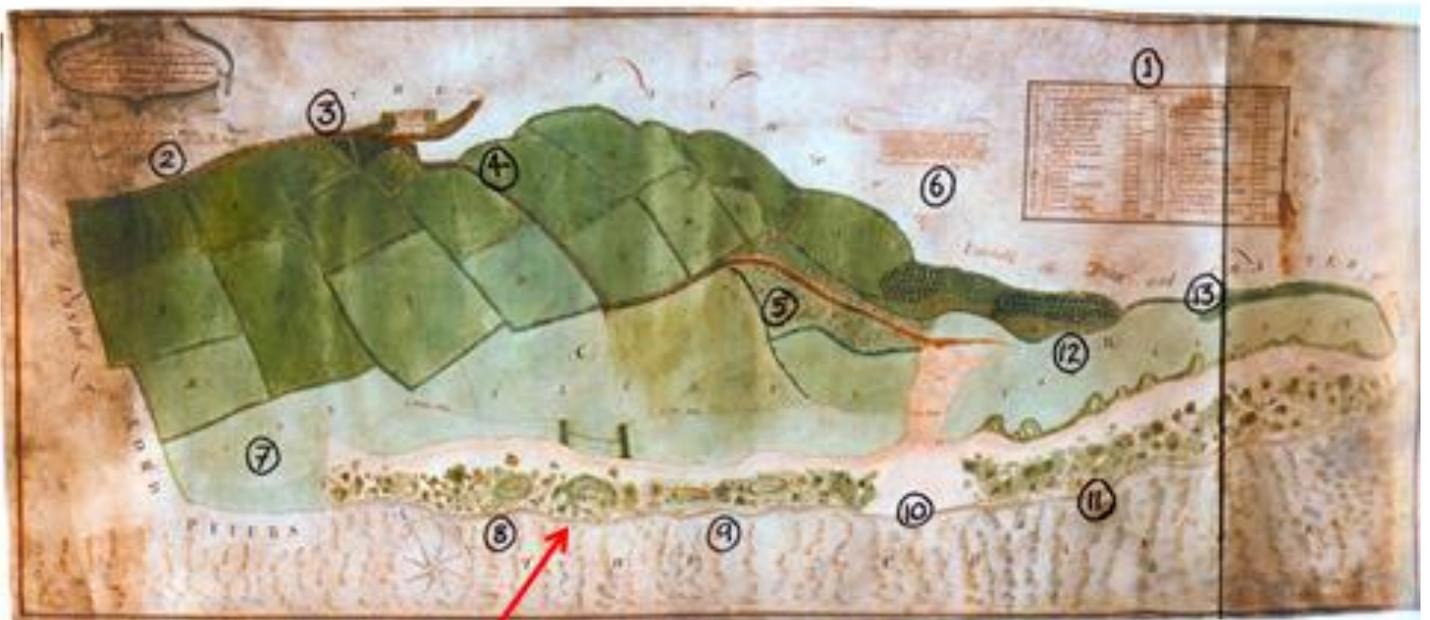


By 1970 this industry was more or less over and the cliff gardens went back to the wild unless kept clear by holiday makers who had huts there.

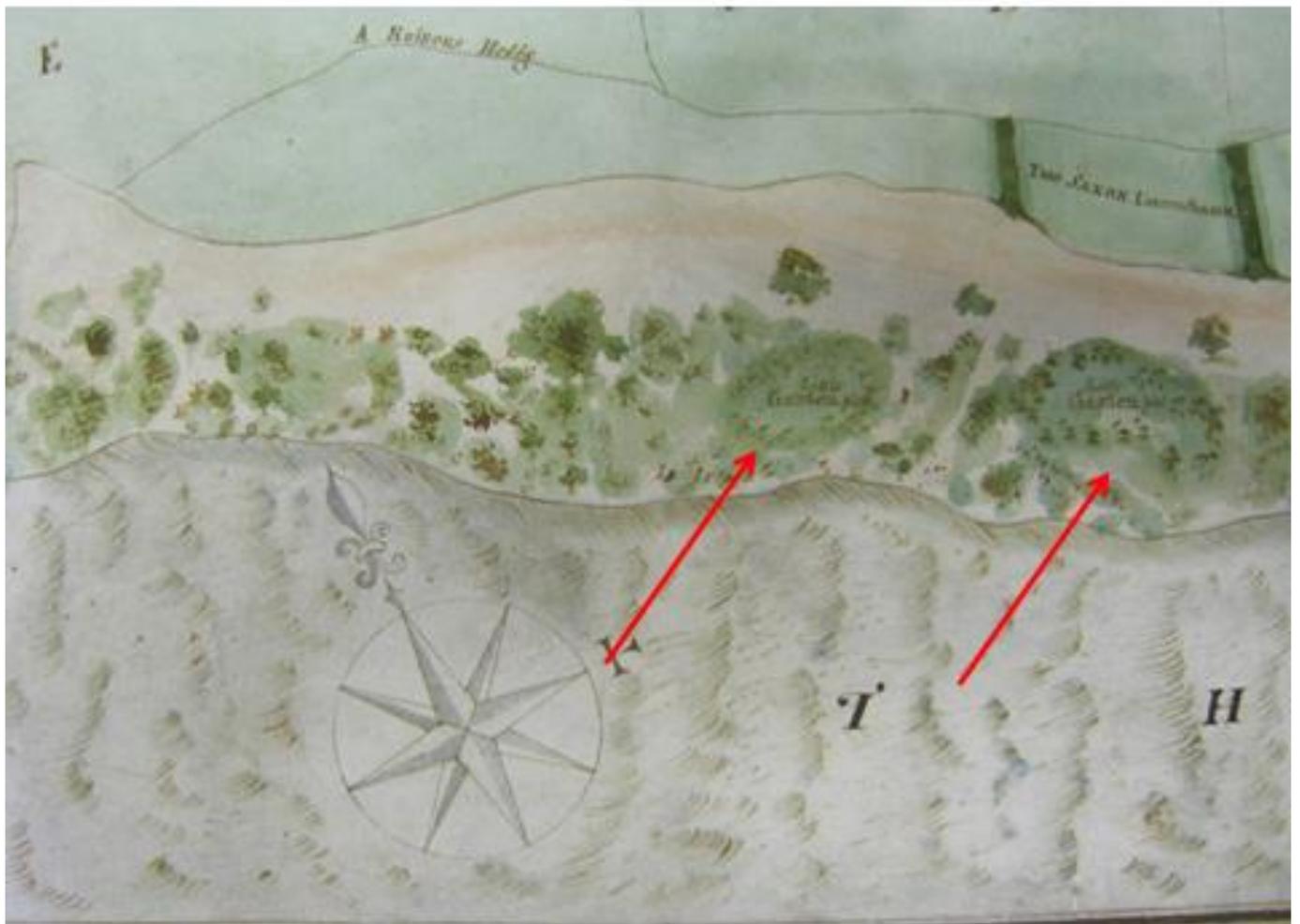


This postcard shows the pros and cons of working on the cliff face. We have had many talks and exhibitions about this industry - we've even published a book about it, so I won't linger here, but just point out that working on a slope was not a new thing to Branscombe men.

Berry Barton map 1763



One of our early maps even shows these little plots and that was in 1763, so a long history there.

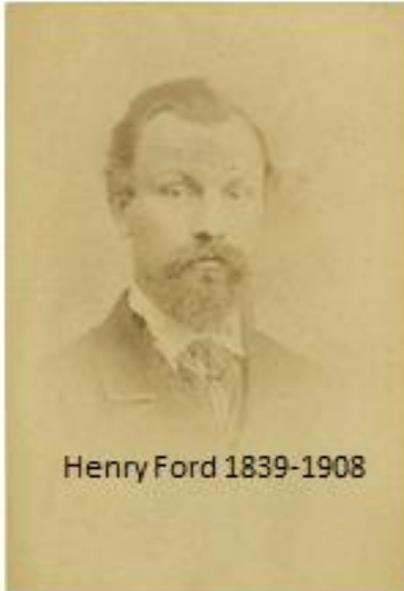


Zooming in to the map we can read 'little garden plot'.

So why did inland allotments appear? We don't know for sure, but possibly men wanted larger plots that were easier to cultivate and closer to where they lived. It does seem many kept on their plots as well, so the attraction of the inland allotments is not easy to fathom out. Some men, as we've seen, wanted land for cattle and saw themselves as small farmers or smallholders. They also wanted to grow crops on more of a field scale. Some men possibly had never had land to cultivate and just wanted to get started.

Labouring men had long needed a patch of land to grow food for their families. Often these were for potatoes, with wheat for bread. Several events occurred that led to an increase of allotments....

- The Allotment Extension Act (1887), was the first attempt at legislating for the public provision of allotments.
- The Local Government Act 1894 led to creation of elected Parish Councils in rural areas
- First meeting of Branscombe Parish Council was held on December 4th 1894 in the village school as there was no village hall yet



Right from the formation of the Parish Council the main topic of debate was the allotments. The major landowner in Branscombe was Henry Ford and he was also on the newly formed Parish Council. Ford leased land to the Parish Council and they in turn rented it out to local men.

The first allotments were requested by and allocated to tradesmen (blacksmith, shoemaker, baker, market gardener, carpenter, coal merchant...). They were for pasture, with some arable land.

The second allotments were for small plots to grow produce. These requests were from labourers.

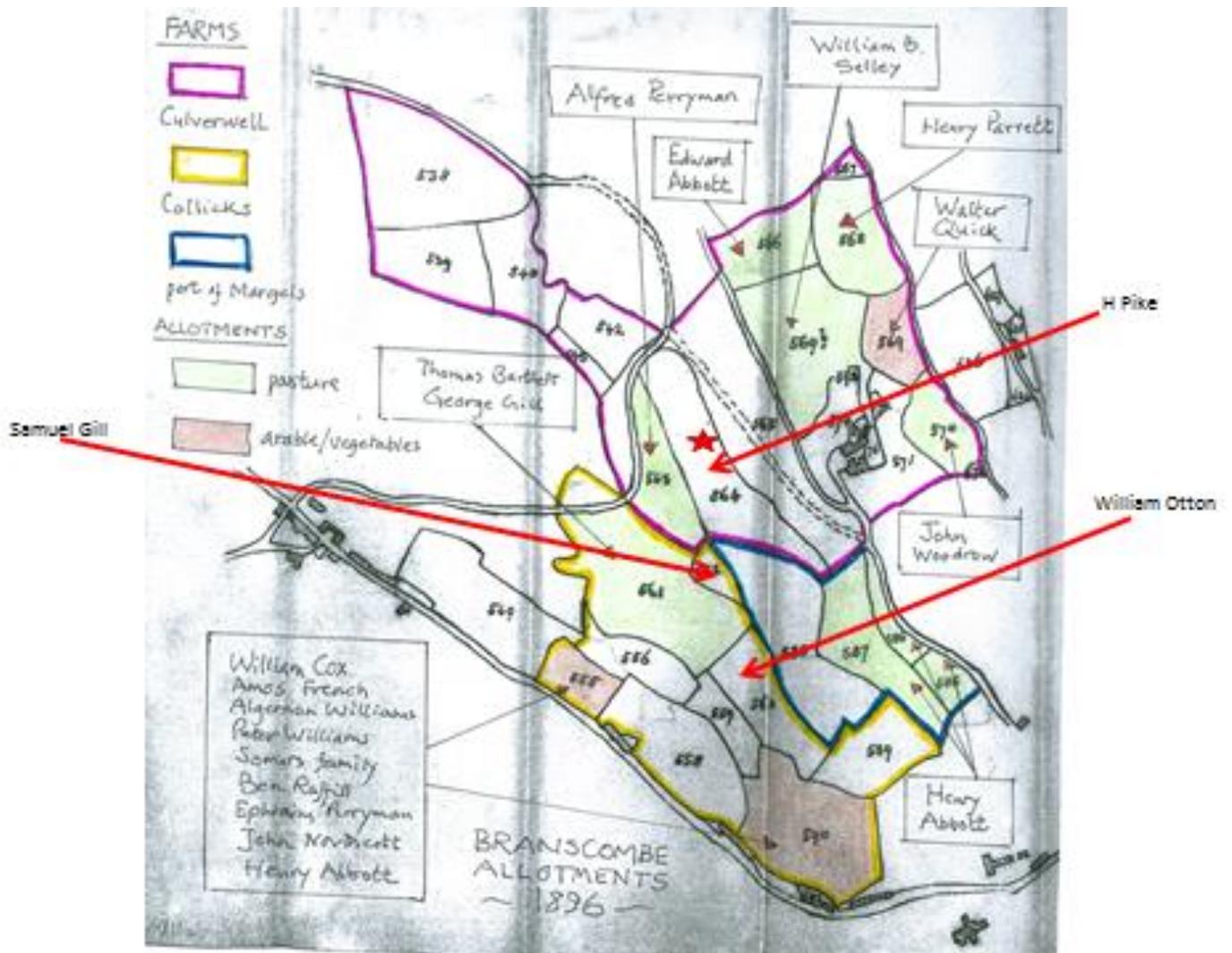
'Plots to be as fairly central in the village as can be arranged'...(Parish Council)



This map was drawn up to show the position of the land the Council took on.

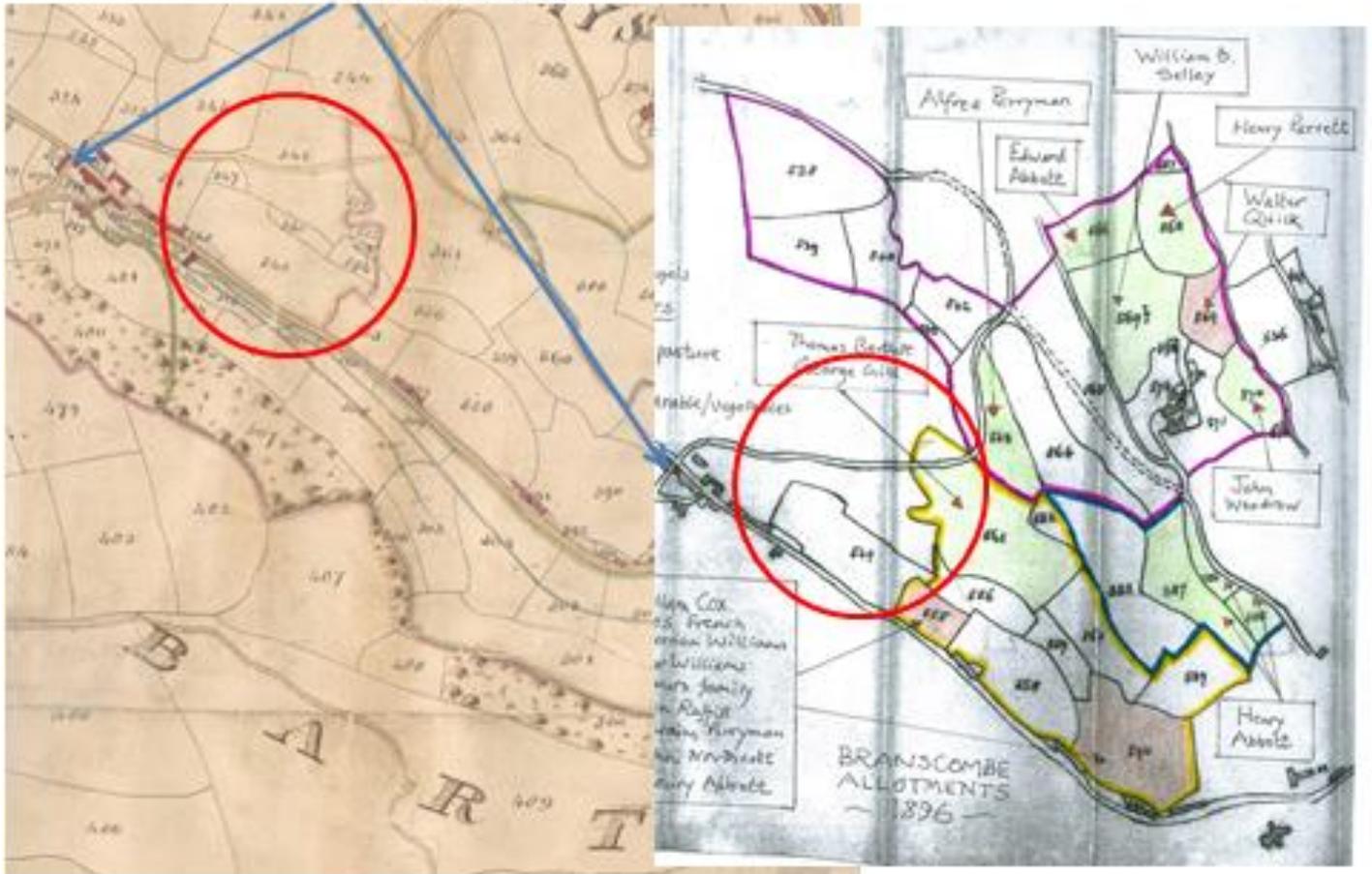
- 7 men applied for pasture land at the first meeting
- A further 16 applications at the second meeting for pasture, arable and small allotments.
- Some men applied for pasture and arable.
- 7 of the men had been plot holders in 1883





I've added a few more arrowed plots to the original drawing. This was pretty much the arrangement at the start of the allotments, but I've not changed things after that as it would become too complicated as men chopped and changed the allotments they held, or added to them, or dropped out altogether over time.

Fountain Head



1840 Tithe Map.....1896 Allotments Map

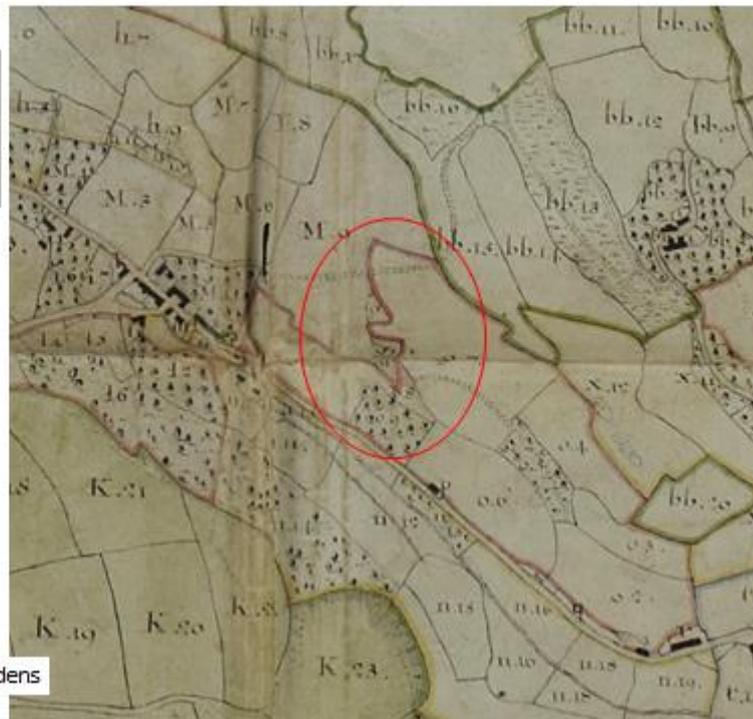
It seems that the allotments map was based on the Tithe Map so I decided to look at the actual Tithe Map and lay it alongside the Allotments Map. What caught my eye was a group of small enclosed plots just outside the area on the allotment map of 1896. I've circled them in red.



Tithe Map showing small allotments on hillside above Pitt Farm. They are named gardens or plots in the apportionments
 This land was rented from John Ford by Ellis Bartlett Dean, blacksmith of Street
 The land was owned by the Dean and Chapter (of Exeter Cathedral)



1810



Hills and Four Gardens

I decided to go back to an earlier map and see what was going on then.



1793 Alexander Law map

Pound was a Leasehold Tenement held by William Leigh from the Dean & Chapter. Leigh also held Berry Farm.

All these little land parcels were listed as gardens. Note the red gates



M3 Garden

As I looked at the map my eye was drawn to even more little plots further up the valley.

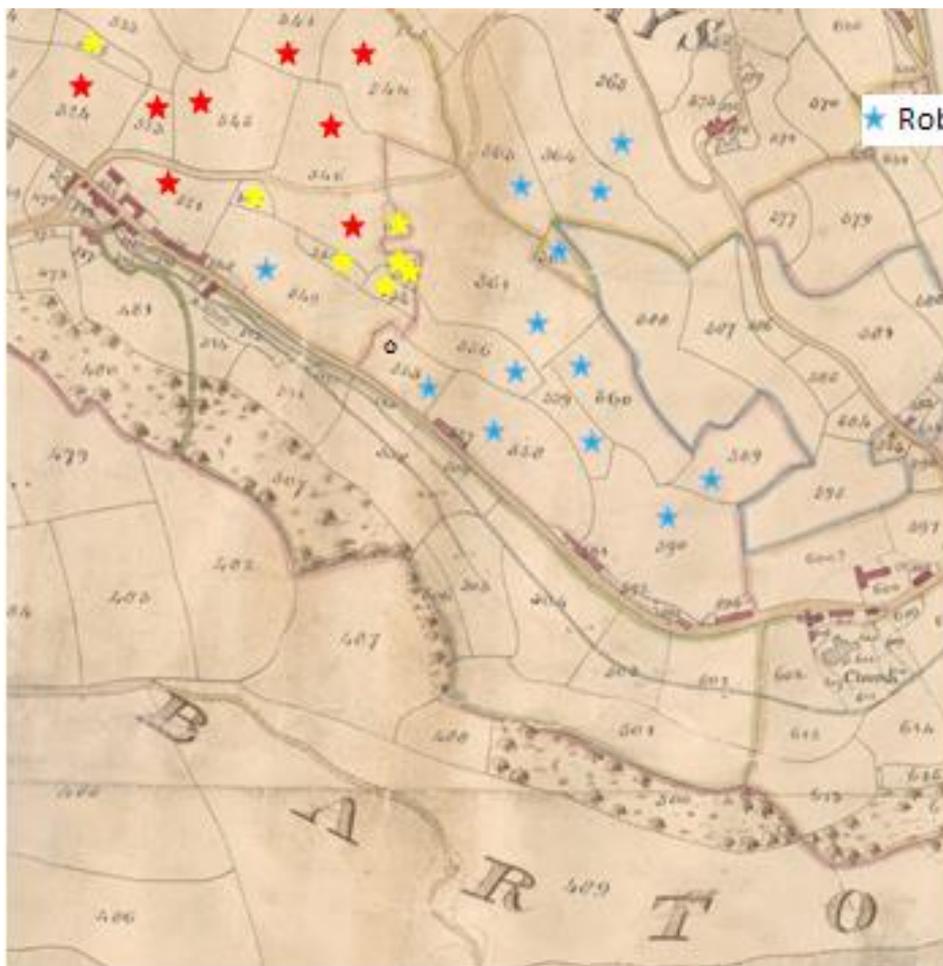


John Butter's land... H4 is orchard, H10 and H11 are gardens

You can even make out a little track running between the two garden plots.

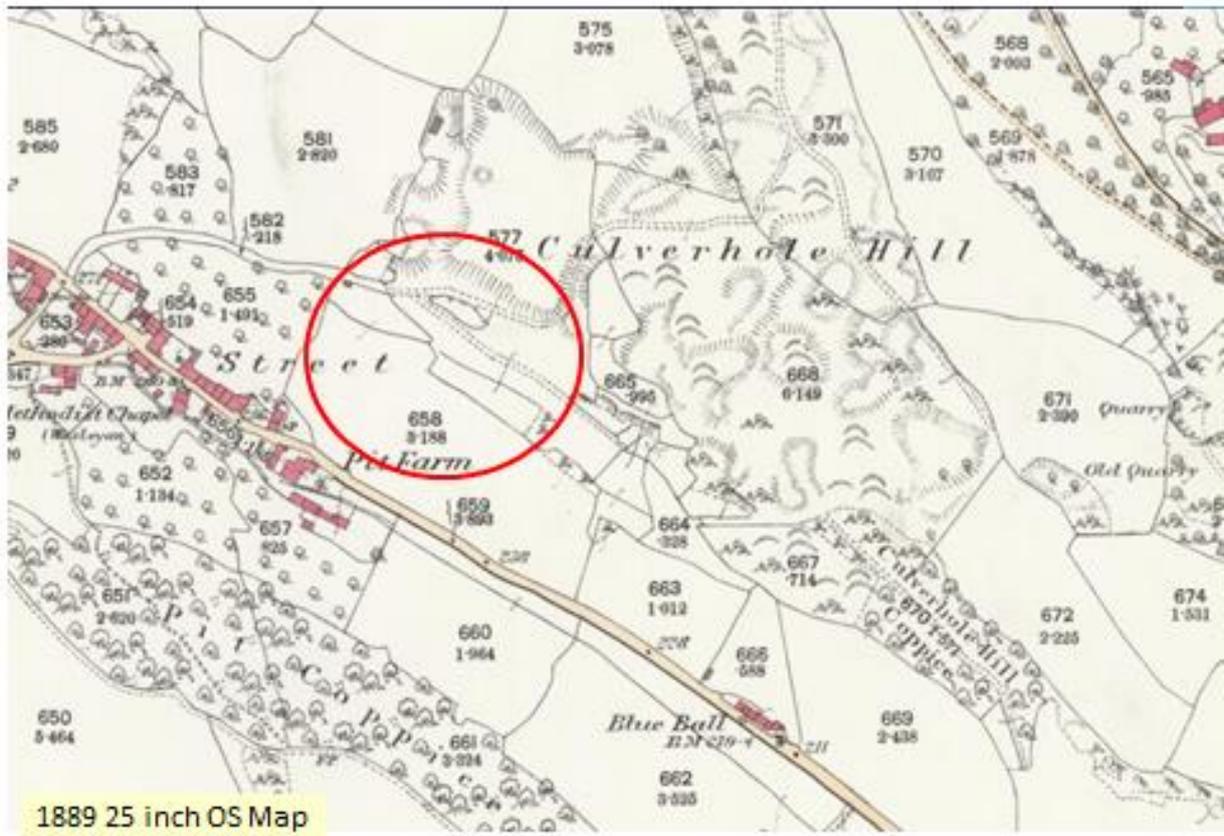


Fifty years later Plot 535 occupied by Ellis Bartlett Dean is still a garden but no longer divided
Red stars indicate his other land

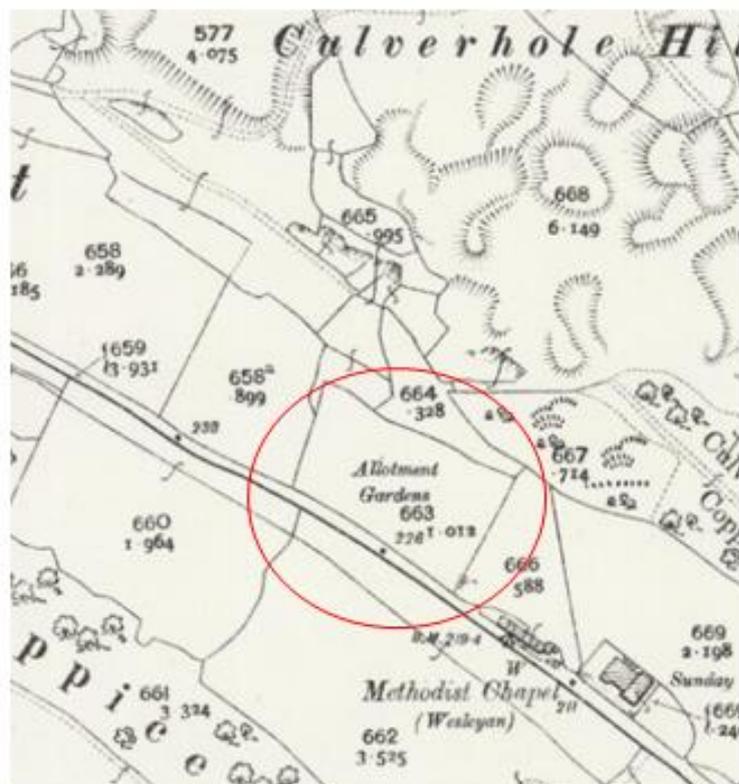


★ Robert Power occupied land

By the time of the 1889 OS map the small plots seem to have disappeared



However by the time of the 1904 OS map 'Allotment Gardens' is marked on one of the fields that Fords leased to the Parish Council.



1904 map shows Allotment Gardens



This is roughly the position of the allotments marked on the OS map of 1904

A look around the allotments...



1st April 1896 George Gill & Benjamin Thomas Bartlett to have The Pitts which is divided into 668a and 668b

1st Oct 1897 the two quarries to be inspected following complaints from Henry Abbott and Thomas Bartlett of cattle falling into the quarry



March 24 1899 Perryman's rent reduced as part of plot 669 has been taken for Wesleyan Chapel



Pasture and arable at Culverwell



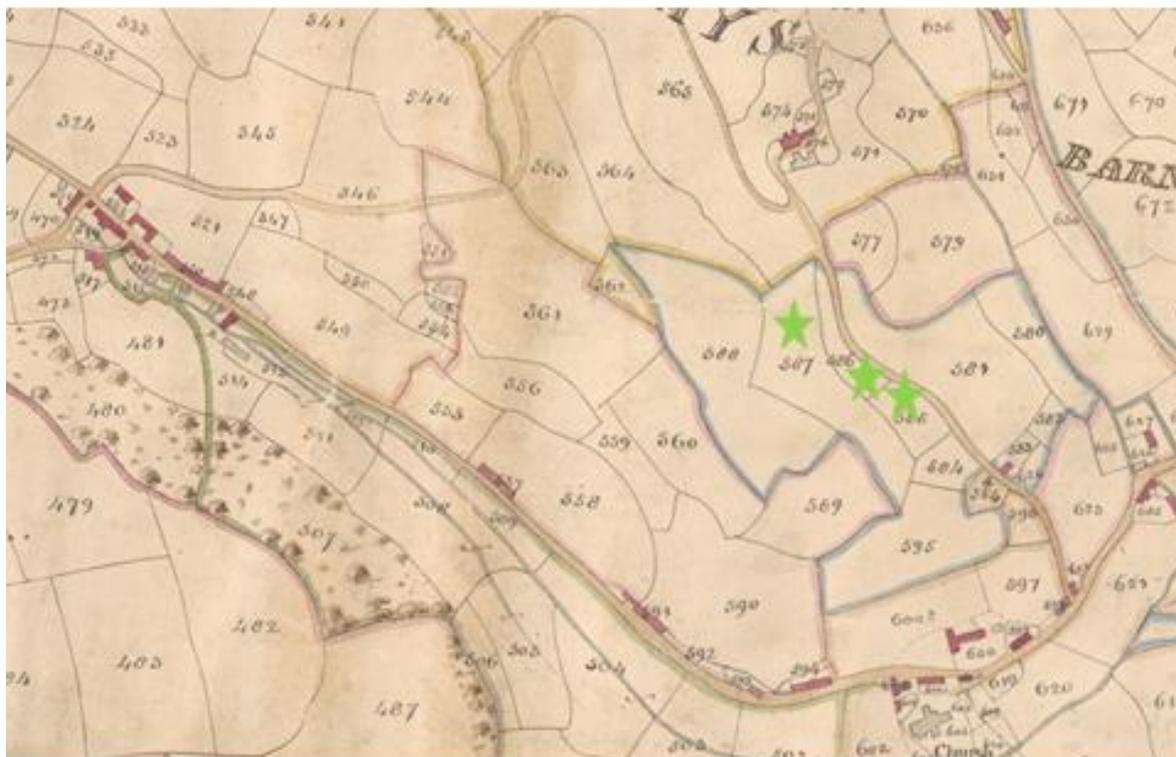
Culverwell



These fields are still recognisable today. In the past this farm was known as Culverhole (Map courtesy of Google Earth).



One of the Culverwell fields today.



Henry Abbott's rented fields



School

I walked up the lane past the school to look for these fields.



They loomed above me. Some changes were needed according to the Parish Council Minutes:

Jan 12 1897: site meeting decided best method of accessing Abbott's plots would be lowering present road by 4 feet at its deepest part and running out to nothing about 40 feet above present gateway. Mr Abbott agrees to do the work for a price.

As some of you know I am interested in Catch Meadows. The photo shows the remains of this old system at Pitt Farm. There is reference in the Council Minutes to various men being required to maintain their catchment cuts. Running cattle when a field is being watered is very damaging. Unfortunately it isn't always possible to identify all those watered fields concerned.

Watered meadows

570 (meadow on Tithe Map) at Culverhole had a catchment cut. This was worked by John Woodrow, and then his son Frank.

PITT FARM CATCH MEADOW

Follow the contour along the hillside and trickle the water down



April 28 1905

Sent. Gill's attention to be called to the fact of his stocking his field when watering the same thereby injuring the land.

The earliest mention of an Allotment Committee is March 1903. Considering the large amount of full Council time taken up with allotment business it is perhaps not surprising a committee was formed. The allotments were in view of anyone walking along the lane, and reading through the Minutes there seems to have been continual problems and complaints. In contrast to this the plats on the cliffs seem to have been havens for the men, who had their own huts (they would have called them linhays) away from prying eyes, real man sheds in fact. Nevertheless the men must have been happy enough to cultivate a bit further inland and likely they too had huts. Subjects of discussion for the committee were the state of hedges, fences, gates, land cultivation, supposed trespass by other allotment holders and the public, landslips and access. Evidence from the Minutes shows they were not men to be downtrodden by authority and often got their own way in matters.

Here's Bill Perryman at his hut on the plats many years ago. It seems he even took his washing out there. I don't think Bill had a village allotment; presumably he liked the cliff better. It is unlikely anyone trying to make a living solely from hand cultivation would get the same early crops on the inland allotments as the cliff plats.



What were the fortunes of these allotments?

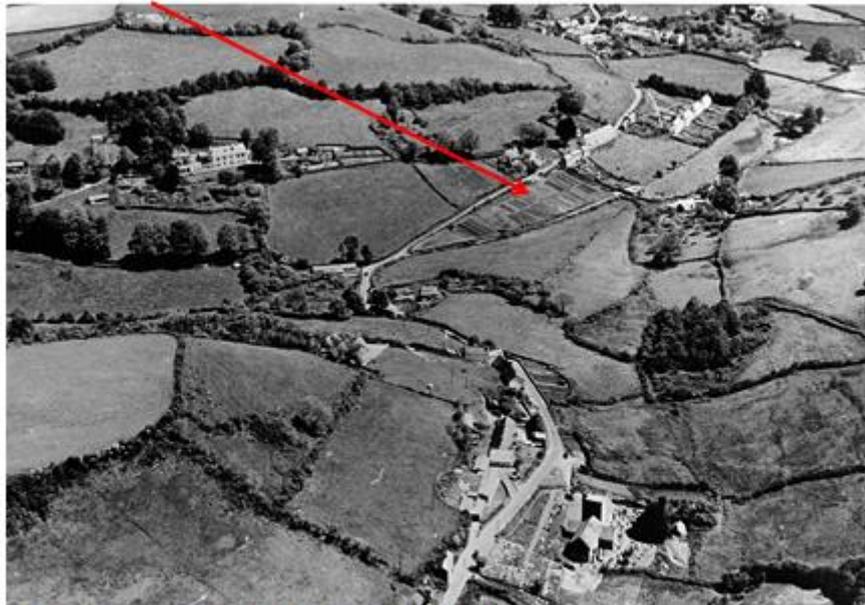
It seems that just before WW1 there was a problem, whereas a few years before there was great demand.



1909 Waiting list

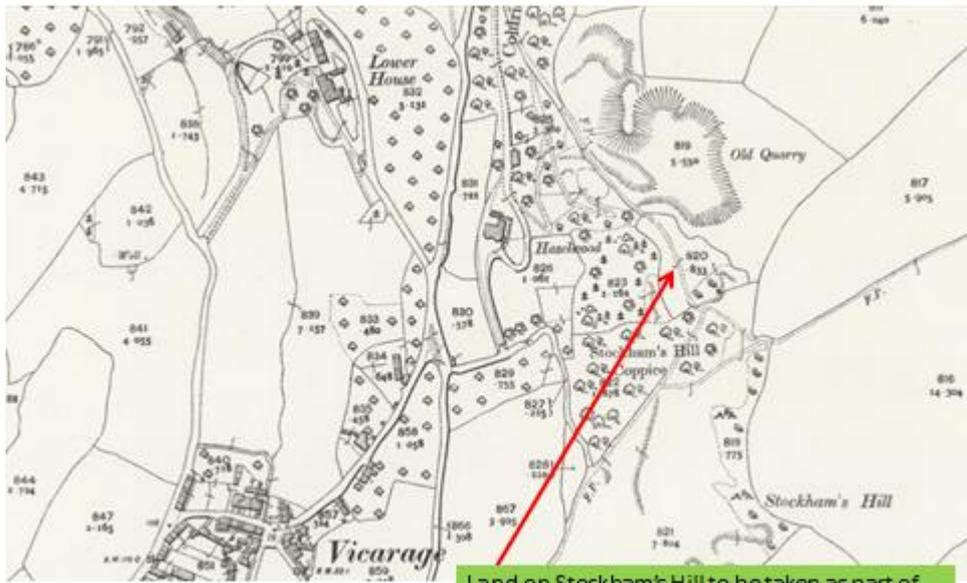
1912 The Council were making a loss on the allotments every year and Ford was to be asked to reduce rent overall by £1. If not the council would consider giving them up.

1913 Ford announced they would not drop the rent. Tenants agree to make up the rent deficit (13 men give differing amounts to make up to £1)



June 1922 twelve men request allotments at Road Close
 Part of the deal is land of Stockham's Hill is to be allotments as well – the men refuse this
 December 1922 twelve men meet at Road Close for allotment allocation

At times the men suggested land they wanted to cultivate. This was mainly refused, but a request for Road Close was approved. I am assuming the allotments at Street were then let go.



Land on Stockham's Hill to be taken as part of deal with Road Close. Men refused this land



Allotments centre left



Old village hall extreme left of postcard



The scene today....allotments gone

With thanks to:

Branscombe Parish Council

Barbara Farquharson

John Torrance

Geoff Squire

Malcolm Somers

Devon Heritage Centre