

Richard is a humble peasant from Sheffield, who has gained both his livelihood and his living from growing organic food for the past ten years. His great great-grandfather wrote one of the first books explaining the functions of the financial markets, " A Money Market Primer" 1891. This article is his attempt to explain the Little Britain world of allotments in terms of modern economics.

I have earned all or part of my living for the past seven years by the practice of therapeutic organic horticulture. I learned my profession by running volunteer groups on allotments for a charity using public funds. This led on to the establishment of several projects based on this model which have received six-figure sums in funding.

These social and therapeutic projects get 95% of their value from the PROCESS of growing over the course of the year, although the momentary pleasure of consuming the PRODUCT is the final payoff.

The cash value of what I have grown, maybe 25 Tonnes over the years, would barely refund the amount I've spent to produce it, let alone cover the exorbitant cost of wages. As an Organic grower, I've been profligate because I've invested in long-term soil fertility and planted crops which will take years to return a profit. As a grower working with others, I've also had to accommodate the needs and abilities of many others and develop facilities of an appropriate standard. Also, because I have always promoted optimal nutritional value in what I grow, I've invested huge sums in expensive fertilisers.

I have always refused to sell produce, partly because it has only minimal market value and I can only produce a minute amount, but mostly because it has so much more value in human terms as a reward and generator of goodwill.

These insights go some way to explaining the stereotypical incomprehension of this aspect of allotments, that it seems to be a relatively money free zone. A culture of independence, barter and mutual reciprocation; the currency of simple human interaction, is currently the most valuable product of allotments.

PROJECTS

The price of potatoes has been notoriously volatile, due to the unpredictable effect of disease combined with the speculative instincts of growers who see high prices last year and over-invest, producing a glut, which reduces returns the next year.

The price of potatoes is some kind of analogy to the economics of organic food growing projects. If we viewed them only as part of the food production sector, they would be phenomenally uneconomic. Staffing costs will be many hundreds of times greater than the value of produce, let alone the profit from sales.

If we only judged one of these projects by the market value of the produce, even the most efficient would have to sell each of its potatoes for many pounds (a proportion of employment costs).

Therapeutic horticulture projects add value by understanding and promoting the social and therapeutic benefits experienced by their clients. So the allotment project now has clinical outputs equivalent to any other therapy and its workers are paid at those rates.

Allotments represent a huge opportunity for social investment and benefit.

Assets or Liabilities?

Imagine you're a local council: you have several acres of old allotments out in the suburbs and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister are on your back about your quota for new housing...

You can see allotment sites from four financial perspectives:

1. The Rental Value of the land is the same as for agricultural land.

Revenue approximately £ 300 per annum

(an expenditure of approximately £30 p.a. per tenant)

2. From the individual tenant's perspective, the market value of the crops are unlikely to recoup the time and resources invested.

However, if one sees the allotment essentially as an extension of the home garden, the value of the plot could be seen as equal to a proportion of property value.

Value: £25,000 (= addition to value of property if land were attached)

Saving: £2,000 per annum (mortgage on equivalent extra garden space)

3. It could be argued that these sites are contaminated, sometimes due to historical factors such as polluting industry, but also by years of cumulative misuse and neglect. This site could require remediation or decontamination.

Cost: up to £70,000 per acre

4. The upside to this scenario would be if you could reclassify this land as a "brownfield" site, development would be more likely, in which case you could pass on the responsibility for decontamination to the developer and pocket most of the receipts.

Saving: £70,000

Revenue: up to £1,000,000 per acre

If you were simply asset-stripping a business, this would be a no-brainer. But these plots are an essential part of real people's lives, which, thankfully, we cannot put a market value on.

An Alternative Pension

Serious investment in locally-grown produce has been unheard of in this country since the wide spread of rail transport in the 1870's.

It is difficult to speculate on the conditions which would make this sector genuinely economically viable again, but it is easier to point to the collapse of various pension schemes and state that in many cases, the subscribers would have been better off investing in a productive plot!

The Executive Allotment.

10 years ago, I established an orchard allotment with a friend who went on to get an office job. It cost about £300 to fully stock 1/8 acre with 20 fruit trees, + bush fruit and strawberries. The value of the crop has already repaid the investment and future crops will be a 20 % return on the capital expenditure.

AS LAND

Allotments were the humane miracle during Thatcherism (1980-1997), precisely because they remained outside the scope of the cult of exploitative greed. Allotments escaped the privatisations that ravaged formerly public sector provision and remained as part of the 'common social wealth'.

When sites are threatened with closure due to development, which requires government sanction at ministerial level, two things happen: communities coalesce in adversity to oppose the change and the site as a whole and also individual plots are valued according to the market rate.

Ownership. Many statutory sites are actually in trust to the Local Authority as the most suitable local agency. Land Trusts might now be able to fulfil this function more effectively.

Homeland Security (formerly civil defence)

After the World Wars, it was obvious that allotments had been an integral element of national survival and provision was maintained and delivered as part of National Defence during the Cold War period.

This argument is highly unattractive, because it is part of Emergency planning and requires envisioning scenarios where ports are closed or fuel for transport unavailable.

The Home-Grown Guard.

It is now quite sensible to suggest encouraging a guild of dedicated food growing enthusiasts who could increase the knowledge base and productive potential of the sector.

Social Care ("formerly Care in the Community")

Allotments have always been used to provide an element of social care. When this is formalised and costed, projects based on allotment sites which employ staff, can be seen as attracting substantial financial investment in social infrastructure.

Allotments for All

It only takes 6 Council Tax payers to demand allotments to require the local authority to provide appropriate sites.

Access to Allotments

The popularity of food growing is at an all time high. But many aspiring growers will be denied the opportunity to turn their dreams into reality because they will be unable to get an allotment.

This crisis is the justification for communally-run plots and sites, permitting wider access and participation. It also indicates that there are potential openings for the private sector in expanding provision. Employment for those currently on Incapacity Benefit.

The Pot Plot If it were legal to cultivate dope. Hydroponics is a multi-million £ industry. Likely to become more common or proliferate.

The Plot Pot Viral rumour – Route to donate to / invest in allotments.

Gizzajob ! : Richard wants to maintain his Bohemian, alternative lifestyle, but is open to offers appropriate to his knowledge and experience from anyone who can recognise them.