

Mapping the Lea Valley's Heritage

Tracing the Lea Valley food growing story, finding out how people in the Lea Valley are keeping the story alive today, and looking towards a new unfolding chapter

Early history: transport and cultivation

6th Century: Saxons were the first people to settle and work the land in the Lea Valley. Their main crops were oats, wheat, rye, leeks, celery, carrots and beans.

My allotment has lots of fruit and vegetables. We also find lots of frogs, we put them in the pond. We are very proud - when we come home and unload all the fruit and vegetables on the table we take photos and tell all our friends about it.

Bethan xxxxx, Walthamstow

16th century: By now there were many maltings in the valley, malting grain for London breweries.

For years the Enfield and Chingford malters opposed a new "cut" in the river made in 1581, which allowed malt to be transported from the Midlands to the city.

1665: Barges of grain from Hertford and Ware saved London from starvation during the Great Plague.

17th century: the Lower Lea became noted for its market gardens, boosted by ready access to water, and London's markets and horse manure. Field vegetables were grown in abundance and there was experimentation with exotics such as pineapples and melons.

My son bought my grapevine, it grew grapes the first year we planted it and the only trouble is trying to keep it under control!

I used to have 50 gallons of wine on the go at a time.

Margaret, Leytonstone



19th Century: the oldest allotments in London

1834: Eleven acres of land at Hagger Lane, Walthamstow, given over to "spade husbandry". Much of the site remains in use, making it probably the oldest allotments in London.

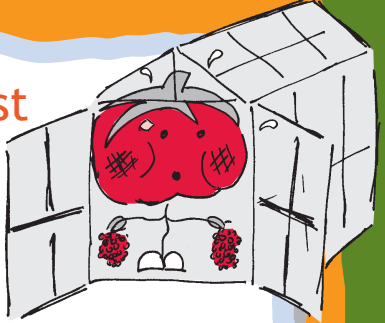
1845: The removal of glass tax. Suddenly, glasshouses began popping up all over the Lea Valley, especially Tottenham, Clapton and Edmonton. But the growth of London pushed them northwards, to the areas that continue to boast many nurseries today: Enfield, Cheshunt, Waltham Abbey and Nazeing.

1852: Allotments created at Markhouse and Higham Hill Common, both in

Walthamstow. These are believed to be the joint second oldest working allotments in London.

Higham Hill Common is today an example of a thriving community allotment site, where diverse communities come together to share in the joy of growing and work on collective projects such as wildlife areas and supplying surplus vegetables to senior citizens.

1917: Transportation of goods on the River Lea peaks, at 743,000 tonnes of goods. A significant proportion of these are malt, flour, beans and manure.



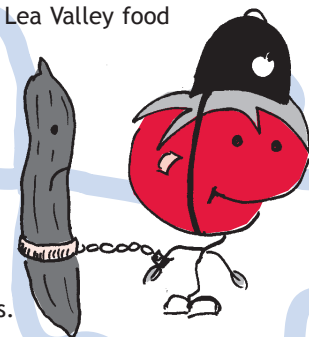
Allotments grew in popularity in the early part of the 20th Century. These are in Tottenham, 1936

World War Two: Dig in for Victory

1939: The outbreak of the Second World War sparked the peak of Lea Valley food production.

The government made it illegal to grow "luxury" items, including not just roses, but also grapes and cucumbers. Tomatoes prevailed, and field veg such as potatoes, onions and cabbages made a return to the market gardens, on spare land around the glass structures.

The War also saw the "Dig For Victory" campaign, encouraging people to grow their own food. Open spaces such as Wanstead Flats were converted to allotment gardens. It is estimated that by 1942 50% of Britain's vegetables were allotment-grown.



YOUR VICTORY GARDEN counts more than ever!



Charles Bright on his riverside plot in Tottenham

My favourite is potatoes - when I grow them myself I can decide when they're ready - have a look and if not put the soil back over. The best potatoes you can eat are straight out of the ground and into the pot - then they're still sweet.

Carol Keogh, Leyton

I remember Dig For Victory: I helped my father with his two allotments in the Railway Goods Yard. On one of them there was a direct hit from a small bomb. It took the rest of the year to fill it in, but the marrows that grew on it the next year would have all been prize winners.

NG Brome, Walthamstow

1920s-30s: tomatoes take over

1920s: Tomatoes, originally grown as an ornamental, overtake cucumbers and grapes as the number one food crop in the Valley. At this time some 200 million tonnes of the red fruit were being harvested each year.

Many of the Waltham Forest residents who took part in OrganicLea's local food survey listed tomatoes as the favourite food they've ever grown.

1930: By now, the produce of the Lea Valley was worth over half of the total agricultural produce of the entire country! Associated

trades also grew up: flowerpots were made from clay dug on the spot at Waltham Abbey, and in Tottenham. Maxen's of Waltham Abbey specialised in greenhouse equipment.

"I grow beans - runner beans, French beans, and tomatoes, basil, parsley, lettuce, chives, sage. I was quite successful with my tomatoes. I grew them in a pot and they were going all summer!"

Kay xxxxx, Walthamstow



Postwar: keeping the heritage alive

1945: After the war, many Italians were invited to the Lea Valley to work in the gardens: many had already been forced to do so as prisoners of war. They were the latest European "influx": at the start of the century, Scandinavian and Dutch people moved to the region to work in the glasshouses. Their descendants continue to populate the Valley.

1950: 1,300 acres of the Lea Valley now under glass.

2002: Some 300 acres of Lea Valley under glass. Most food produced is distributed beyond London and the Valley.

I grow or my family and friends - they are impatient for curry cooked with my teendra, callaloo, potatoes and coriander. The bright green colour of fresh garden grown veg makes me very happy.

Mrs. Begum, Leyton

I grow onions, garlic, cauliflower, broad beans, runner beans, tomatoes... since



Through OrganicLea's Cropshare scheme, local growers like Sid and Carol can sell their surplus produce



Growing Communities box scheme gets a local supply of produce from a 'patchwork' farm of small market gardens and growing sites in Hackney

I was 7 years old I've been interested in farming. I don't believe in fertilizer - I do the natural thing. We don't buy onions, garlic, runner beans etc from Sainsburys. If I had my way, every supermarket would be closed down and replaced by organic shops.

Sid Hamilton, Walthamstow

We are growing at least 6 different varieties of tomatoes, chard, onions, pumpkins, courgettes, cucumbers, gem squashes, carrots, corn, beans, mint, basil, coriander, borage, strawberries, marigolds, sweet and chilli peppers, St John's wort... We also have wild produce like blackberries, elderflowers, elderberries, plums, apples, fat hen, also comfrey, nettles and bindweed that drive us crazy but we use the liquid as fertiliser.

Nuria Rodriguez, Friends of Tottenham Marshes Community Gardens

Olympic-sized demolition

The entrance to Manor Gardens Allotments, between a bus depot and a tatty warehouse, was unpromising, but led, across a bridge over the Old River Lea, to one of London's most beautiful allotment sites. Amongst its rickety sheds and rusting wheelbarrows, were plots

tended by growers whose origins were as diverse as the produce they grew. On the riverbank down one side of the allotments, grew fruit trees. In Spring their scent and heavy blossom made the place feel like a little bit of countryside in London. A hundred or so years ago these allotments were given to the gardeners of East London by Major Villiers, an old fashioned philanthropist. During Villiers'

lifetime a nearby company wrote to him offering to buy the allotments in order to extend their factory. He wrote back offering to buy their factory in order to extend the allotments. But neither the old Major, nor any of the plot holders, could have kept the Olympics at bay. The site has been evicted and destroyed to make way for an Olympic footpath. An alternative site given to the plot holders has poor soil and was illegally built on common land.

There's everything on there. Leeks, parsnip, cabbage, brussels, carrot, onion, shallots - you name it it's on there. The first time I came to the allotment was 40 or 42 years ago. I am normally here 4 days a week. Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. You can't get fresher food than that.

Albert, former Manor Gardens allotment holder

Growing on

The 2012 Olympics has changed the face of the Lower Lea valley forever, but it won't stop the food growing renaissance that is taking place all along its banks and much further afield, part of a global movement to 'reclaim the fields'.

Organiclea is one of a number of food projects who are connecting together in the Lea Valley. There are many other urban food growing projects in north-east London, too many to mention here; look on our website www.organiclea.org.uk for more contacts or visit www.londonfoodlink.org for projects across the whole city.

