

Compton allotments

The Compton allotments were created in the 1830s as a scheme that was intended to alleviate the sufferings of the poor of the parish.

The poor had always been a part of the population but their plight worsened and their numbers increased after the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. The victory at Waterloo gave rise to a great national celebration but the joy was short lived for farmers and their workers. During the war, French blockades had prevented food imports and consequently prices rose but, after the war, the price of grain dropped and caused a slump in the industry that was to last for decades. Farmers struggled to pay their rents and farm workers, too, suffered in their turn for not only were their wages reduced by this drop in prices but there were also a large number of demobbed soldiers and sailors finding their way into the labour market, bidding down wages still further.

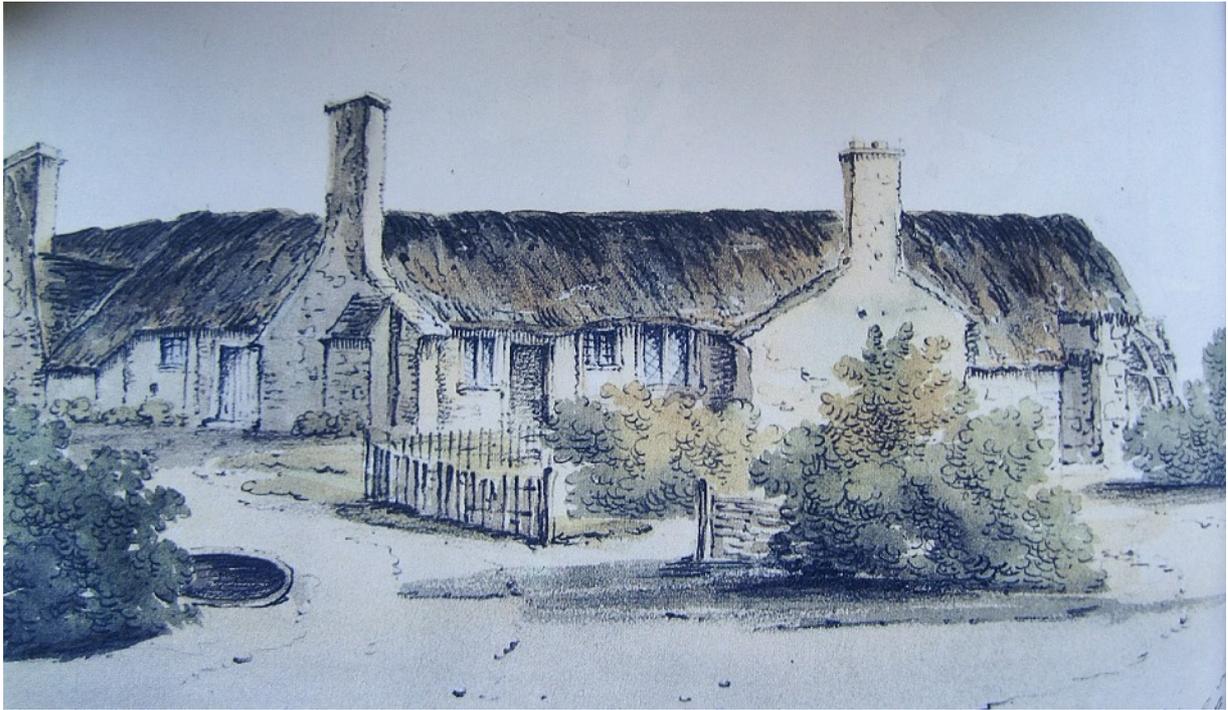
On top of this, smallholders were also suffering as larger landowners bought up their land, seeking economies of scale. People who had previously made a small but reliable living from a few acres and the right to pasture their beasts on the common became marginalised. When the Pease Marsh common was enclosed in the 1810s it deprived small farmers and cottagers of their common rights and, for many, their livings ceased to be viable. As a consequence, some of them became landless labourers seeking employment on the large farms, a search that was not always successful.

As a result of these circumstances, poverty was rife in the 1820s and 1830s and life was extremely hard for most rural people. There was a form of social security: arrangements for relieving the poor had been established at the beginning of the seventeenth century when each parish became responsible for supporting its own paupers by raising a poor rate. By the 1820s, however, cracks in the system were beginning to show under the strain of increasing demand.

In the early 1830s the government acted. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 swept away the Elizabethan system of parish-based poor relief replacing it with a system based on larger areas. It created unions of parishes with new Union Workhouses that were built on proceeds from the sale of village institutions and which were to be funded out of the parish rates. The philosophy behind the new unions assumed that people were poor because of their personal failings, not because of the prevailing economic conditions. Consequently, life in the union workhouses was harsh and was specifically designed to discourage claimants.

Some of the assets of the parish were sold to fund the new workhouse. An entry in the records of the Compton parish vestry meeting (the precursor of the parish council) that was held on 12th July 1837 notes that the almshouses, which were situated on the

common, should be sold to James More Molyneux. The proceeds went to Compton's share of building the new union workhouse in Warren Road in Guildford. Compton's other assets, such as the parish poorlands and the Church House, remained in the hands of the Trustees for the Poor for a few years before being sold in 1838, although this time the proceeds stayed in Compton and were invested for the benefit of the poor. There were also various parish charities that would supply such things as clothing and fuel for the needy.



*Compton almshouses painted by John Hassell in 1824.
They stood on the site of what is now Compton Cottage
in Polsted Lane (plot 292 on the tithe map).*

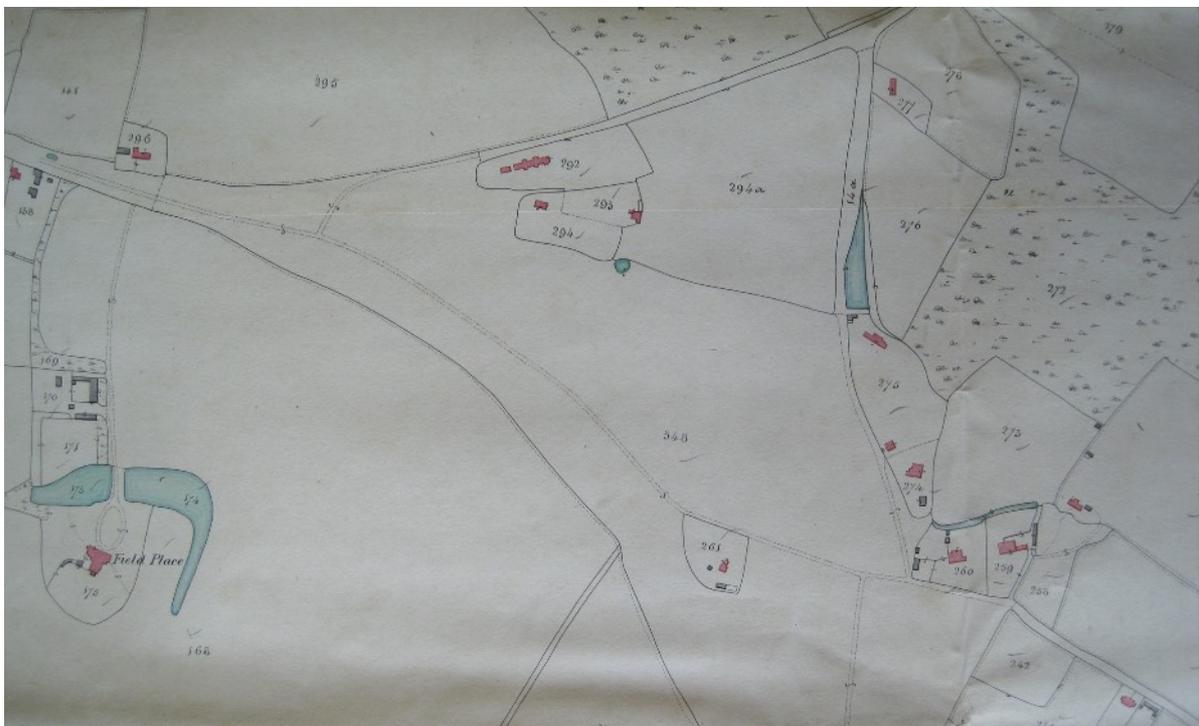
Parishes did their best to keep their poor out of the workhouse to prevent them from becoming a burden on the rate payers of the parish. It was to this end that the Compton allotments were created in the early 1830s to enable the poor to grow some of their own food:

At a vestry holden in the parish church of Compton on Tuesday 20th November 1832 for the purpose of taking into consideration to inclose a certain peice of the waste land on the lower common for the benefit of the said parish it was agreed by the undersigned inhabitants present to make the inclosure as hereinafter described.

*George More-Molyneux, rector
James More-Molyneux
William Mills, Overseer*

It is likely that the land was enclosed soon after this, although no evidence has been found of the exact date that the allotments were created. They were undoubtedly there by November 1839, however, when the vestry meeting decided that sub-letting of the plots was to be forbidden. The gardens also appear on the Compton tithe map that was made during the same year when they were in the ownership of the Trustees of the Poor.

There are no records of how the allotments were used in the nineteenth century but it is likely that they were fully exploited. Despite improvements in the lot of the Victorian agricultural labourer around the middle of the century, their life continued to be hard and growing food was a necessity for most. This would have been particularly so during the harsh agricultural depression from the 1870s onwards.



An extract from Compton tithe map of 1839 showing the allotment gardens on plot number 294a and the almshouses on the neighbouring plot numbered 292.

In contrast, the late twentieth century was a difficult time for the allotments. Following the years of full production during the two World Wars, interest in allotment holding subsided and, during the 1960s and 1970s, the number of plot holders diminished, despite the efforts of some old stalwarts such as Don Warren. The land to the northeast of the accommodation path became derelict and only some of the plots on the other side were in use. This was, significantly, the side with access to the stream for the lack of a reliable and convenient water supply had long been a problem.

Towards the end of the twentieth century the parish council, under the chairmanship of Kathleen McAlmont, had piped water installed which helped the situation. However, it was the new energetic Allotment Society that really breathed new life into the gardens with the installation of a deer-proof fence and other improvements. No longer would everyone's hard work be eaten out of the ground.

Compton allotments are now nearly 190 years old, a living part of Compton's history that originated in the difficult days of the 1830s. Many of the plot holders now come from outside the parish and, in these easier times, they are able to cultivate their plots for pleasure, not out of dire necessity. Long may they continue to thrive.

Philip Gorton June 2021

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Sources:

Compton parish vestry book	ref: COM/8/1	Surrey History Centre
Compton tithe survey	ref: 846/1/39	Surrey History Centre
Victoria County History of Surrey, ed. Henry Malden, 1911		