

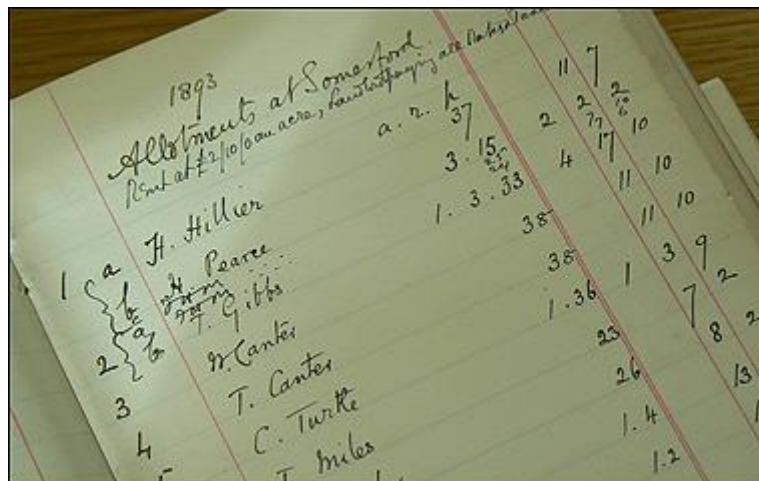
Happy Earthday!



Celebrating ... delighted Jill and gardener Stuart at the allotments

A GROUP of gardeners who work on Britain's oldest allotments were yesterday celebrating their plots' 200th "birthday".

The six-acre site — broken up into 50 small plots — was first set aside for common folk to grow vegetables in 1809. And today — as then — locals in Great Somerford, Wilts, get use of the land absolutely free.



Historic ... 1893 list of plot-holders

The Rev Stephen Demainbray had the idea of giving parishioners use of common land in the early 1800s.

He stepped in when an Inclosure Act — one of many brought in since the 1100s — threatened to hand all local land over to the wealthy.

The Rev Demainbray was official chaplain to King George III — and asked the monarch to spare part of his parish from the Act.

The King agreed and said six acres were to be kept "in perpetuity" for locals.



Shared ... 1809 map of allotments

It was agreed the land would be shared out annually in small “allotments” — giving the plots their name.

And all 50 allotments are still being cultivated today.

Jill Shearer, who has written a book about Demainbray, said: “The village was lucky the vicar had a few royal connections and was able to pull some strings.

“He was a philanthropist who saw that something needed to be done for the poor.”

Stuart Frayling, 65, who has an allotment, said: “We’ve had it in our family for about 60 years. It’s an important part of my life.”