

By Richard Savill -Last Updated: 2:32PM GMT 10 Mar 2009

England's oldest allotments celebrate 200 years

Allotment holders on what is believed to be England's oldest site are celebrating its bicentenary.

Two hundred years ago, the six-acre site in Great Somerford, Wilts, was the only land in the area available to commoners, and became the first allotment.

It was created in 1809 when the Rev Stephen Demainbray asked King George III to spare part of his parish from the Enclosure Acts.

Mr Demainbray used his royal connections as the official chaplain to King George III to claim several acres of land in the parish for the benefit of the labouring poor.

The Great Somerford Inclosure Act stipulated that six acres in the centre of the village were to be kept "in perpetuity" for the poor.

Jill Shearer, a Great Somerford resident, who has written a book about Mr Demainbray and the allotment, entitled 'The Poor Man's Best Friend', said: "This area was the birthplace of the modern allotment movement.

"At that time villages around here made sure the poor still had some land at least.

"The village was lucky the vicar had a few royal connections and was able to pull some strings.

"It was a pioneering time and he was a philanthropist who saw that something needed to be done for the poor who were losing their land."

Today, there are still 50 allotment plots in the village and they are free to local residents.

Stuart Frayling, 65, a retired fireman, has had one of the allotments in his family for 60 years.

He said: "I am quite proud that this is where allotments came from. It is an important part of history."

Great Somerford allotments would have originally been used by poor local villagers to harvest wheat and oats, along with the nutritious root vegetable mangelwurzel, used primarily for feeding livestock.

They would also have grown potatoes, peas, beans, cabbages, parsnips and leeks, all of which are still produced in the allotment.

Today's growers are also cultivating more exotic produce such as green chick peas, globe artichokes, asparagus, and dessert gooseberries. In about 1900 the church gave control of the allotments to the parish council, which continues to administer them to this day.

Every Easter Tuesday the site is inspected, and contracts are renewed as they have been for 200 years.