Housing and private outside space in nineteenth century England

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Abstract: This article looks at private outside space – understood as gardens or yards today – in five English towns across the nineteenth century. The history of the ordinary English back garden is a neglected one, and this article provides a quantitative backbone to the very first study of this kind. It is generally assumed that urban gardens were only provided in the last quarter of the nineteenth century for the middle classes, and the first quarter of the twentieth century for 'the masses'. The article reveals that, in fact, private outside spaces – whether yards, gardens, or shared plots – were provided for all classes from as early as the first quarter of the nineteenth century. It also suggests that a Victorian theory of disease prevention lay behind the creation of the back garden as we know it today.

Introduction

'Historians of the garden have been dazzled by the rare and beautiful', wrote Stephan Constantine in 1981, and it is almost impossible to disagree with him today. 'Historians of the garden tend to refer only briefly and usually disparagingly to the vast majority of gardens with which people are most familiar: their own', he continued.[1] Constantine, Martin Gaskell, and others have since redressed that imbalance, and histories of popular amateur gardening are now fairly common.[2] Strangely, though, in an England that devotes £5 billion a year (or 1% of its GDP) to horticulture and gardening[3] – an England that has 'Got the Gardening Bug'[4] and covers an area equal to the county of Dorset[5] with its 23 million patches of garden[6] – there has been no research on the number of houses which had gardens in the past. There has been no attempt to pinpoint when the majority of households were provided with private plots, nor when these plots were considered 'gardens' as we might imagine them today, as opposed to 'yards' for purely practical purposes. It is generally assumed that gardens have always been provided for the aristocratic or plutocratic elites – either attached to their urban *pied-à-terres* as places for sparkle and spectacle, or as the large designed landscapes surrounding their rural retreats – and that suburban villa gardens were increasingly common for the upper middle classes throughout the nineteenth century. It is also assumed that gardens for 'the masses' were only provided at some point in the early twentieth century, when improved transport networks and increased disposable incomes and leisure hours loosened bonds to true urban living and allowed for more spacious living in the semi-detached suburbs.

This article seeks to provide a quantitative backbone to test these assumptions. The first section discusses the quantitative methodology and results. The second section briefly discusses the shift

[1] S. Constantine, 'Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation in the 19th and 20th Centuries' (*Journal of Social History*, Vol.14, No.3, 1981, pp.387-406) p.387
[2] See, for example, Anne Wilkinson's *The Victorian Gardener: The growth of gardening and the floral world* (Sutton Publishing: Stroud: 2006)
[3] R. Floud, 'The Hidden Face of British Gardening,' lecture given at Gresham College, London, 12 May 2011; transcript available online at http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-hidden-face-of-british-gardening
[4] *How Britain Got the Gardening Bug*, first broadcast on Sunday 29 March 2009, 21:00, on BBC Four; first terrestrial broadcast on Tuesday 5 May 2009, 20:30, on BBC Two; last broadcast Wednesday 1 June 2009, 01:55, on BBC Four. (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00jkrkp)
[5] S. Constantine, 'Amateur Gardening', p.387
[6] *Springwatch, Episode 5*, first broadcast on Monday 6 June 2011, 20:00, on BBC Two

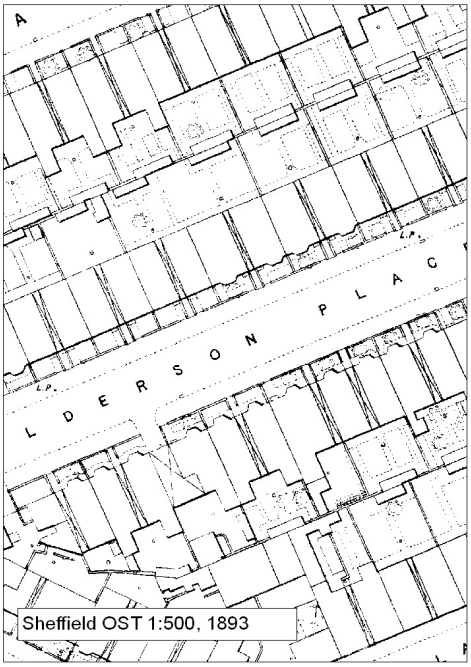
from yard to garden, and assesses the unexpected possibility that a discredited theory of disease prevention may have been behind the creation of the modern garden as we know it today.

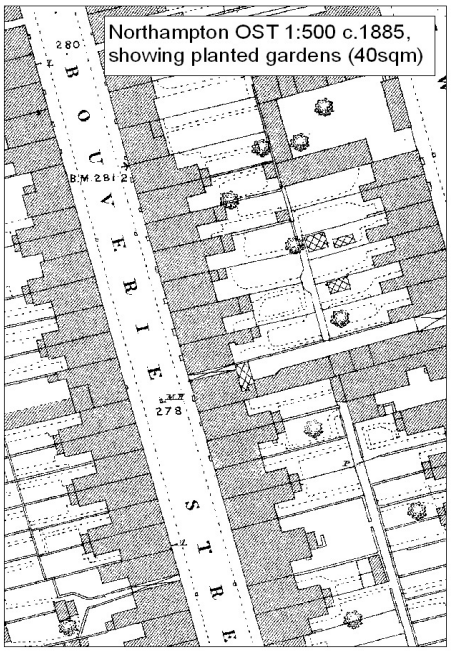
Quantification I: methodology

2,000 records detailing heads of household's occupations and addresses were sampled from the 1881 Census Enumerators' Books (CEBs) of five English towns: Sheffield, Bradford, Preston, Northampton, and Dorchester. The addresses given in each record were matched to their exact street addresses on digitised 1:2500 Ordnance Survey (OS) maps of the towns from the 1870s or 1880s, and uploaded into a Geographic Information System (GIS) dataframe. The boundaries of the built-up area in each town in four time-periods were also traced onto the digitised OS base-map: pre-1800, 1800-1840, 1840-1870, and 1870 onwards.

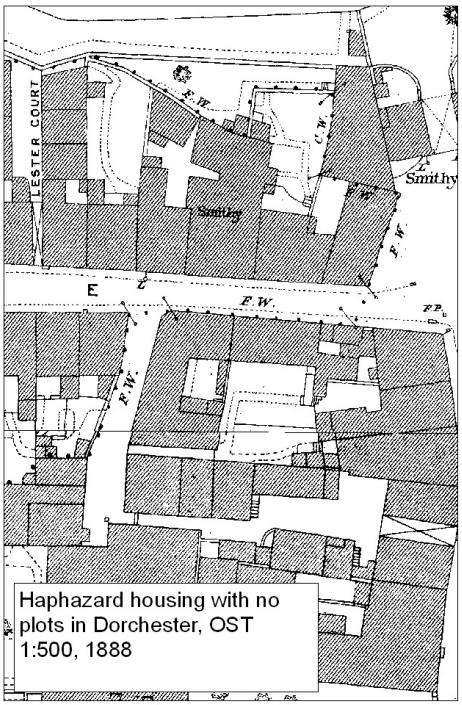
Each household found on the base map was marked according to its plot type: private plots, shared plots, or no plots. These shared plots differed obviously from private plots, whose boundaries clearly indicate their use by only one, usually terraced, house. They differ too from houses with no plots at all, where outside space is so haphazard or limited that it cannot be considered a garden or yard. Back-to-back houses fall into the 'no plots' category, even if they share a central or back court. The map extracts below show the differences between the three types: private, shared, and none.

The sampled records from the five towns formed c.1-2% of the 1881 populations of each of those towns, and about 80-85% of the extracted records could be linked to their street addresses on the base maps.





Figures 1 (top left), 2 (top right), 3 (bottom left), and 4 (bottom right): Shared plots in Sheffield (top left), private plots in Northampton (top right), and no plots in Dorchester and Bradford (below). Source: OST 1:500, and OS County Series 1:2500



The areas of any plot were also calculated. In addition to plot size and type, the occupation of the occupier was noted and coded, and the period in which the house was likely to have been constructed was estimated, using the map traces previously mentioned.

In this assessment, which tests nebulous assumptions against quantitative data, the question soon arises: what is a garden, and how can we define it? The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) specifies some degree of planting, while some people will assume that a garden must be 'large' (itself a subjective term). A size definition has been used here. 20m² is a small space (illustrated in the images below), but one large enough to support some degree of planting, in addition to any practical purposes the space may have: a privy, a water-butt, a kennel. Anything smaller than 20m² would, it is suggested, be wholly filled up with the practical uses.

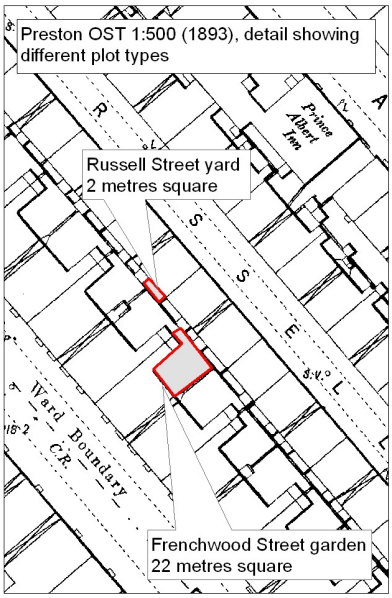


Figure 5 (left) and Figure 6 (right): Preston plots on Frenchwood and Russell Streets (Lancashire CRO, CBP4/1/1-200)

The 1932 caption to the above photograph held in the Lancashire Record Office in Preston reads:

> Yards and South side of Russell Street (looking north): Taken from yard of no.64 and shows insufficient yard area (2'9' x 9'6') and high yard wall (8ft). Contrast with gardens of Frenchwood Street houses on the left. Taken 1-4-32

Quantification II: results

The data show that there was considerable regional variation in plot type and plot provision, and that size did not correspond as neatly to period of construction and social class as assumed in the historiography. The theory runs that gardens were late-nineteenth century phenomena for the middle classes and early twentieth-century ones for the masses.

The data for all five towns is below, in table and chart form. These households were selected from the 1881 CEBs, but relate to houses built throughout the nineteenth century.

		Private plots	Shared plots	No plots	Total
Sheffield	Frequency	38	173	244	455
	%	**8**	**38**	**54**	**100**
Bradford	Frequency	101	36	375	512
	%	**20**	**7**	**73**	**100**
Preston	Frequency	169	44	45	258
	%	**66**	**17**	**17**	**100**
Northampton	Frequency	179	25	34	238
	%	**75**	**11**	**14**	**100**
Dorchester	Frequency	108	53	98	259
	%	**42**	**20**	**38**	**100**

TABLE A: Plot types in five English towns in the 19th century

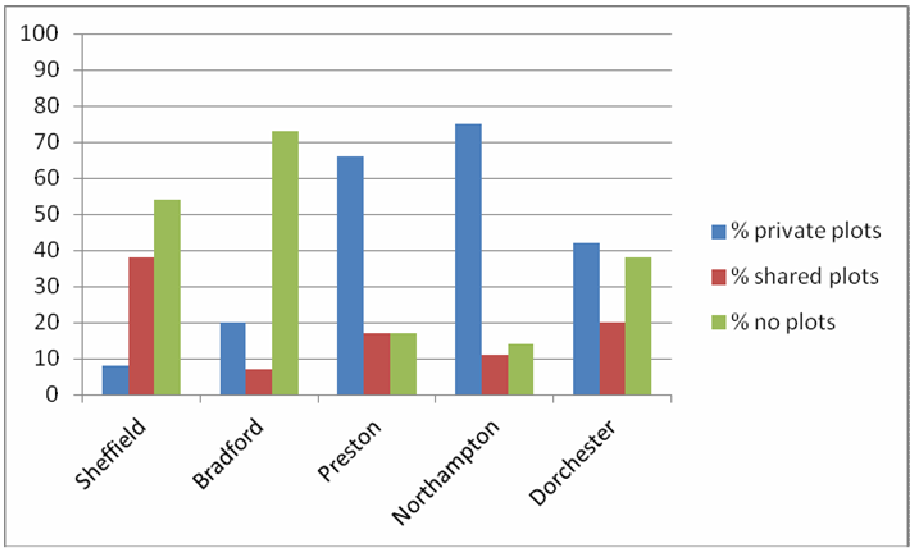


Figure 7: Plot type percentages in five English towns in the 19th century

While it is obvious that in Sheffield and Bradford, houses with no plots at all were in the majority (and most of those houses with no plots in Bradford were back-to-backs), as we might expect in such centres of mechanised heavy industry and rapid urban growth, it is the number of shared and

private plots, in unexpected places, that stands out. In Preston for example, another typically industrial town of the industrial north-west of England, houses with private plots formed two thirds of the sample. In Northampton, a mid-sized market town with an important but largely non-mechanised shoe-and-boot industry, private plots formed three quarters of the sample, but in Dorchester, a very small market town, almost wholly untouched by industrial development and associated rapid population growth, private plots only formed just over 40% of the sample. Only 8% of houses in Sheffield had private plots, but a further 38% had shared spaces: plots shared between two or three terraced houses.

Using map traces from the earlier periods overlaid on the digital base-map, a picture can be built up of how plot type varied over time, illustrated in the table and chart
below.

	% Private plots	% Shared plots	% No plots	Number of observations
SHEFFIELD				
Pre-1800	0	5	95	81
1800-1840	4	35	61	161
1840-1870	18	43	38	92
1870 onwards	12	60	28	121
BRADFORD				
Pre-1800	11	11	79	19
1800-1840	12	3	85	182
1840-1870	24	4	72	118
1870 onwards	25	12	63	193
PRESTON				
Pre-1800	27	24	49	41
1800-1840	62	24	14	86
1840-1870	81	9	10	67
1870 onwards	80	11	9	64
NORTHAMPTON				
Pre-1800	42	10	48	48
1800-1840	58	25	17	65
1840-1870	97	3	0	118
1870 onwards	100	0	0	7
DORCHESTER				
Pre-1800	49	6	45	86
1800-1870	28	25	47	106
1870 onwards	54	33	13	67

TABLE B: Plot type according to period of construction in 5 English towns in the 19th century

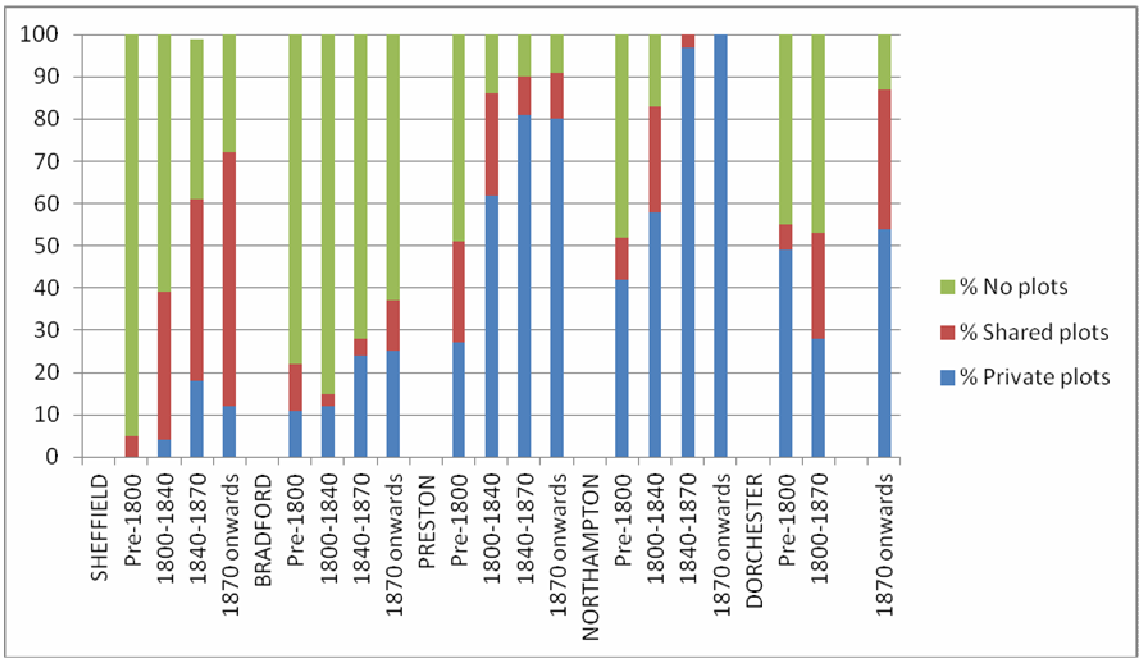


Figure 8: Plot type according to period of construction in 5 English towns in the 19th century:

Note: In the Dorchester sample, it will be observed that only three periods of observation have been included: the period 1800-1870 has not been divided into pre- and post-1840 sections as in the other four towns. This is because the mapping of Dorchester in the earlier periods is poor, and no maps of a suitable scale were available to create the map traces. As change over time is still recorded, although not ideal, this is not a major problem.

Table B shows that there was, broadly, an increase in private plots over time, an increase that is most noticeable in Bradford, Preston, and Northampton. Conversely, the percentage of sampled houses with no plots at all fell over time in all towns. Most scholarship and popular thought on urban gardens maintains that they only became common at the end of the nineteenth century. The research presented here demonstrates, for the first time, the empirical proof of this. The orthodoxy has not, however, acknowledged the variety of plot provision over time and between towns. These data illustrate this variety for the first time, revealing, for instance, the existence of private plots in Preston from as early as 1800, and acknowledging and quantifying the shared plots in Sheffield throughout the nineteenth century.

The next figures reveal the extent of the relationship between plot type and social class. This is a static picture; a cartographic and census-based snap-shot of the 1880s.

SHEFFIELD	% Private plots	% Shared plots	% No plots	No. of observations
Unemployed/paupers	0	14	86	7
Unskilled working class	0	34	66	89
Skilled working class	3	39	58	214
Lower middle class	21	49	30	43
Middle-class	14	45	41	49
Upper middle class	55	30	15	20
Independent incomes	20	60	20	5
BRADFORD	% Private plots	% Shared plots	% No plots	No. of observations
Unemployed/paupers	15	0	85	13
Unskilled working class	9	9	82	102
Skilled working class	15	8	77	199
Lower middle class	23	0	77	75
Middle-class	26	13	61	70
Upper middle class	65	4	31	26
Independent incomes	75	0	25	4
PRESTON	% Private plots	% Shared plots	% No plots	No. of observations
Unemployed/paupers	40	20	40	5
Unskilled working class	57	25	18	51
Skilled working class	75	13	12	110
Lower middle class	67	33	0	15
Middle class	63	16	21	56
Upper middle class	50	10	40	10
Independent incomes	0	0	100	1
NORTHAMPTON	% Private plots	% Shared plots	% No plots	No. of observations
Unemployed/paupers	100	0	0	1
Unskilled working class	71	6	23	31
Skilled working class	76	15	9	135
Lower middle class	83	4	13	24
Middle class	68	7	25	28
Upper middle class	75	0	25	8
Independent incomes	100	0	0	3
DORCHESTER	% Private plots	% Shared plots	% No plots	No. of observations
Unemployed/paupers	12.5	12.5	75	8
Unskilled working class	16	35	49	86
Skilled working class	44	22	34	70
Lower middle class	69	8	23	26
Middle class	42	11	47	38
Upper middle class	95	0	5	19
Independent incomes	90	10	0	10

TABLE C: Plot type according to class of occupant in 5 English towns in the 19th century

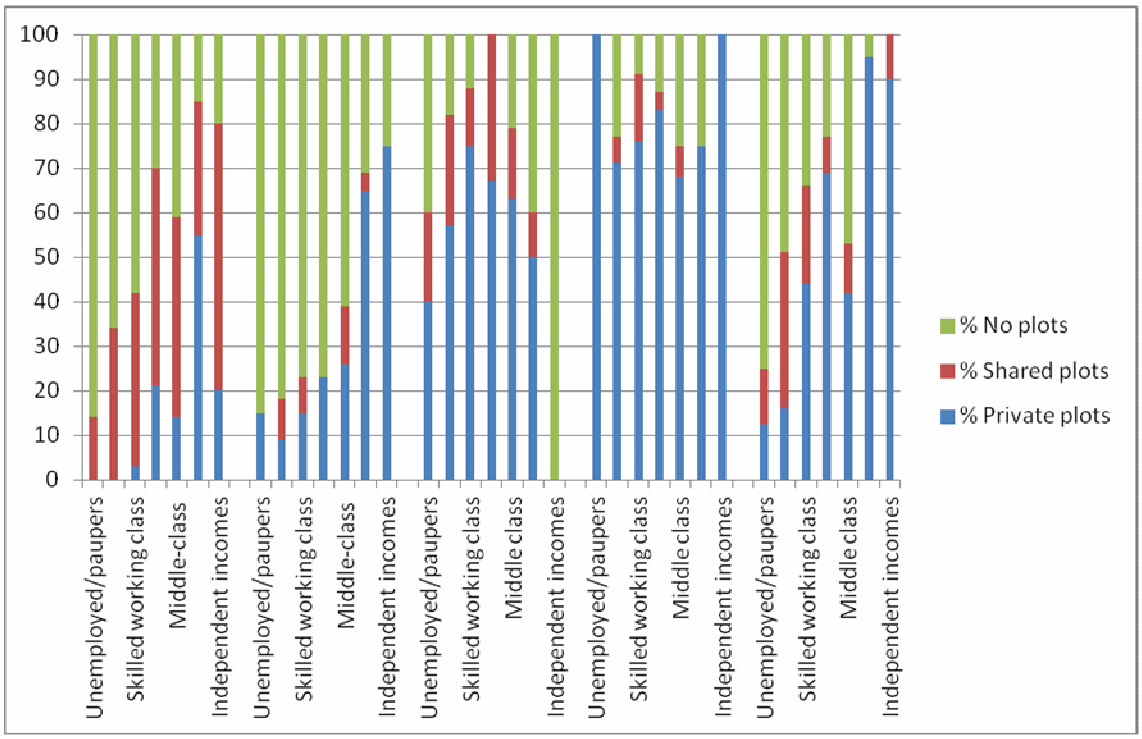


Figure 9: Plot type according to class of occupant in 5 English towns in the 19th century

The data here show that Sheffield and Bradford follow a largely predictable pattern: higher social classes had a greater percentage of private plots than the lower classes, and private plot provision generally increased with social class. This was not always the case, though. In Preston, Northampton and, to a lesser extent, Dorchester, the very lowest classes – the unemployed and the unskilled and skilled working classes – had a similar percentage of private plots to the higher classes.

There is a caveat to be added here, of course. The possession of a private plot does not mean possession of a garden. Size matters. The table and figure below show the size distribution of private plots in the five towns.

	Percentage of sampled private plots in each size category				
Size category (m)	SHEFFIELD	BRADFORD	PRESTON	NORTHAMPTON	DORCHESTER
Under 10m	0	1	9	4	6.5
10m-19m	0	10	42	13	9.3
20m-29m	0	32	36	16	11.1
30m-39m	0	15	9	23	7.4
40m-49m	3	8	2	20	7.4
50m-59m	5	6	1	10	5.6
60m-99m	26	12	1	7	16.7
100m-199m	21	8	0	7	18.5
200m-299m	21	2	0	0.5	6.5
300m-999m	19	4	0	0	6.5
1000m-9000m	5	3	0	0	4.6
N	38	101	169	179	108

Table D: Plot size distribution in 5 English towns in the 19th century

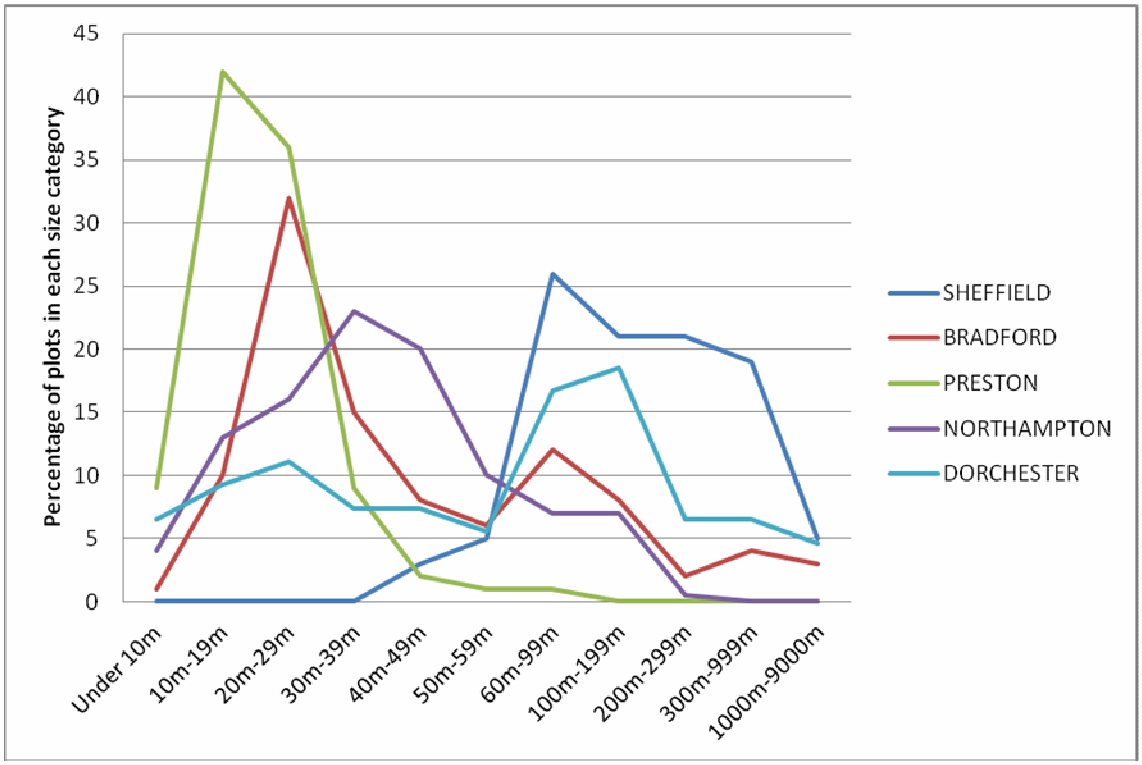


Figure 10: Plot size distribution in 5 English towns in the 19th century

The figures above show that although Preston may have had many private plots, they were very small – the vast majority under 40m² in area. In Sheffield, by contrast, the handful of private plots were comparatively large: most larger than 60m².

Bradford	Mean (m^2)	Median (m^2)	N	Min. (m^2)	Max. (m^2)	Std. Dev.
Pre-1800	38.5	38.5	2	35	42	4.95
1800-1840	38.82	31	22	8	165	35.667
1840-1870	79.43	31	28	18	899	164.106
1870 onwards	451.18	38	49	14	8324	1520.232
Preston	Mean (m^2)	Median (m^2)	N	Min. (m^2)	Max. (m^2)	Std. Dev.
Pre-1800	19.09	18	11	9	32	7.516
1800-1840	19.15	17	53	6	68	11.563
1840-1870	20.94	18.5	54	7	75	11.663
1870 onwards	21.43	21	51	8	41	6.694
Northampton	Mean (m^2)	Median (m^2)	N	Min. (m^2)	Max. (m^2)	Std. Dev.
Pre-1800	43.15	26.5	20	7	185	45.887
1800-1840	29.13	25	38	5	80	19.465
1840-1870	48.37	40	114	10	219	32.595
1870 onwards	40.57	46	7	21	53	11.559
Dorchester	Mean (m^2)	Median (m^2)	N	Min. (m^2)	Max. (m^2)	Std. Dev.
Pre-1800	176.81	49.5	42	10	3501	533.92
1800-1870	332.13	71	30	16	4441	892.868
1870 onwards	296.97	67.5	36	4	4168	844.71

TABLE E: Plot size according to period of construction in 5 English towns in the 19th century

Table E above shows the median plot sizes in each period in each town. While in most cases there was an increase in plot sizes over time, this increase was not a large one. It will be noted that Sheffield is excluded from this discussion: with only 38 private plots observed in the whole sample, the numbers involved were too small for a meaningful discussion of means and medians.

BRADFORD	Mean (m^2)	Median (m^2)	N	Min. (m^2)	Max.	Std. Dev.
Unemployed/paupers	37.0	37	2	26	48	15.6
Unskilled working class	39.7	33	9	22	83	20.7
Skilled working class	40.1	27	30	14	132	32.1
Lower middle class	55.2	36	17	17	267	62.9
Middle class	541.1	46	18	18	8324	1945.1
Upper middle class	519.4	59	17	8	6030	1443.5
Independent incomes	1307.7	142	3	24	3757	2122.0
PRESTON	Mean (m^2)	Median (m^2)	N	Min. (m^2)	Max.	Std. Dev.
Unemployed/paupers	20.5	20.5	2	15	26	7.778
Unskilled working class	17.34	17	29	7	30	6.212
Skilled working class	21.05	20.5	82	8	75	10.786
Lower middle class	16.7	16.5	10	6	29	6.832
Middle class	22.63	21	35	7	68	11.845
Upper middle class	24.6	30	5	11	33	9.29
NORTHAMPTON	Mean (m^2)	Median (m^2)	N	Min. (m^2)	Max.	Std. Dev.
Unemployed/paupers	10	10	1	10	10	.
Unskilled working class	32.27	30.5	22	5	100	19.739
Skilled working class	43.11	38	103	6	219	32.991
Lower middle class	47.65	41.5	20	7	153	39.674
Middle class	47.05	39	19	19	110	25.52
Upper middle class	61.67	40	6	22	128	47.137
Independent incomes	63	45	3	34	110	41.073
DORCHESTER	Mean (m^2)	Median (m^2)	N	Min. (m^2)	Max.	Std. Dev.
Unemployed/paupers	32	32	1	32	32	.
Unskilled working class	115	69	14	4	719	180.585
Skilled working class	72.61	41	31	5	258	71.997
Lower middle class	85.17	54	18	6	366	90.711
Middle class	98.5	55	16	15	343	104.161
Upper middle class	1118.89	246.5	18	18	4441	1597.778
Independent incomes	87.33	63	9	16	206	66.034

TABLE F: Plot size according to class of occupant in 5 English towns in the 19th century

Table F demonstrates how plot size varies according to social class. There is a relationship to be observed here between class and plot size but, once again, there is variation within this pattern.

These data have shown, for the first time, the extent to which housing in the nineteenth century was provided with open space: shared plots, or private yards or gardens. They have demonstrated that plot type and size varied according to period of houses' construction and the social class of the

house's occupant. The data have also revealed that variation between the sampled towns was more noticeable than variation within one town. Sheffield, Bradford, and Preston were all rapidly-growing industrial centres in the north-west of England, yet all three had a different pattern of yard and garden provision. Sheffield had very few private plots (thirty-eight in a sample of 455 records), and those private plots that did exist were large gardens which belonged almost exclusively to the upper-middle classes. Shared plots, however, were common, and even the 'lower' social classes had access to this form of outside space across the century. These were not haphazard communal courts but neat rectangles of gardens, shared by two or three terraced houses. In Bradford, back-to-backs with no or severely limited outside space were the dominant housing type for the working and lower-middle classes, and, more clearly than in Sheffield, private plot provision was directly related to period of house construction and social class. The Preston data contrasts sharply with that of Sheffield and Bradford: here, two thirds of sampled houses had private plots. While in the other two towns private plots (such as existed) were relatively large in area, 51% of the private plots in Preston were yards smaller than 20m², and 96% were smaller than 40m². The plots may have been small, cramped, and unhealthy, but their very existence in a town as industrialised and overcrowded as Preston is surprising. Moving south to towns that were less obviously industrialised and smaller in both population and physical extent, the Northampton data display a very different picture of urban garden provision: gardens of about 40m² were common for all classes and in all periods. In Dorchester, gardens were common to all periods and social classes, but private plots were not as universal as might be assumed. In fact, 42% of sampled houses had private plots, but houses with no plots formed 38% of the sample – a close second.

Explorations and explanations

These quantitative findings have unambiguously demonstrated that urban gardens were not the preserve of urban elites; nor were they purely a late-nineteenth-century phenomenon. To some, however, these figures may seem somewhat unbelievable. How, in the smoky and overcrowded cities of Victorian England, could green stuff grow? More pertinently, how, in an age when profit was paramount, overcrowding intense, and urban land at a premium, could most English houses have at their backs an essentially non-productive and non-profitable open space of their own? Why should, as Stefan Muthesius tells us, terraced housing become the dominant type in Victorian English towns, rather than back-to-back blocks or high-rise, high-density municipal developments?[7]

Two sets of questions arise from the data. The first relate to the variation in plot type and size that has been shown over time, between classes, and between towns. As has been seen, the population

[7] See S. Muthesius, *The English Terraced House* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1982)

and physical extent of a town were not the only determinants of plot provision in the nineteenth century. Further issues which are pertinent include: relative population densities; the presence or absence of other forms of open space such as public walks, parks or allotments; system of rent and tenure; the motives of the landowner or large-scale builder; land values which relate in turn to topography, the existence and extent of transport networks, rising real incomes, and increased leisure hours, but examinations of difference are not addressed by this article.

The second set of questions is to do with the growth of 'the garden' as a dominant English cultural institution, and is closely associated with both the shift in contemporary perceptions and desired uses of yards and gardens across the nineteenth century, and the regulation of public and private spaces in general in the last third of the century. It is this second set of questions which is examined by the remainder of this article.

To assess the number of houses which had gardens in this nineteenth-century sample, the simplest solution is to use the 20m² size definition in conjunction with Tables E and F. For example, looking at the median size figures for Preston across the period, it can be seen that most plots pre-1870 were yards under 20m² and most plots post-1870 were gardens (just) over 20m². The *OED* suggests that a garden must be planted, however, so how many of these private plots had some degree of greenery? There is no simple answer here. Simply counting the number of planted as opposed to unplanted plots is not possible. The OS mapping is good, but not that good, and while it may be possible to try out this approach on the larger-scale 1:500 OS town plans, the plot markings on the 1:2500 scale maps used in this assessment are not accurate enough to rely on.

The changes which occurred in the uses and perceptions of private spaces attached to houses can, however, be neatly framed by the following sets of nineteenth-century evidence. In 1840, the Select Committee Report into the Health of Towns (PP 1840 XI) was predominantly concerned with the provision of private yards for the purposes of ventilation when quizzing their witnesses. James Pennethorn, for example, recommended that 'every house should be built with a back yard of at least one fourth its own size.'[8] A typical publication related to gardening in the first half of the century was John Claudius Loudon's *Gardener's Magazine* (1828-1844), which cost five shillings per issue, and catered almost exclusively to those who could afford a lavishly-planted and extensively-worked large plot. Forty years later, in the second half of the century, the 1881-2 Select Committee on Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement (PP 1882 VII) was asking its working-class witnesses, in relation to recreation and not ventilation, 'have you gardens connected with the

[8] PP 1840 XI p.169

houses?'[9] A typical garden publication was Shirley Hibberd's *Amateur Gardening*, launched in 1884 at the cost of a penny per issue, and which offered advice to those who could afford to use only their own labour in their garden plots.

If we look at architecture, we can see that the back of a mid-century Victorian terrace presents a closed face to its back plot. There would be a scullery extension and a back door, which take up most of the back of the house. Windows might be large, but they are not there to provide a good aspect of the back garden, rather to provide light and air to the rooms within. A later-century house, however, will embrace the back: there might be French doors, a conservatory; the back parlour – as well as the scullery or kitchen – might open out onto the lawn. The lawn itself – an early invention, but previously only available to those with the money and leisure to maintain it – was by the last third of the nineteenth century fairly common. The privy had, in many cases, moved indoors and become a water-closet. The ash-pit and midden had been covered over and put at the bottom of the plot, or, with the increase in non-compostable household refuse, removed altogether.

Perceptions and uses of private open space had clearly changed over the course of the nineteenth century. There is not the space in this article to engage with these changes in much detail, but it will tease out one issue of public health theory and national legislation.

The 1877 Model Building Bye-Laws issued by the Local Government Board in wake of the wide-ranging and far-reaching 1875 Public Health Act, included this significant clause:

> Every person who shall erect a new domestic building shall provide to the rear of such building an open space exclusively belonging to such building, and of an aggregate extent of not less than one hundred and fifty square feet, and free from any erection thereon above the level of the ground, except a water closet, earth closet, or privy, and an ashpit. He shall cause such open space to extend, laterally, throughout the entire width of such building, and he shall cause the distance across such open space from every part of such building to the boundary of any lands or premises immediately opposite or adjoining the site of such building, to be not less in any case than ten feet.[10]

With this clause, every new house built in England should have been provided with a back yard of at least 14m² in size. Model building bye-laws were just that – a model for others to follow – but their provisions were followed by most municipal boroughs across the country. The story of back plot provision begins far earlier than the 1877 bye-laws, however.

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[9] PP 1882 VII p.174

[10] *Knight's Annotated Model Bye-Laws of the Local Government Board, relating to I. Cleansing of Privies etc. II. Nuisances. III. New Streets and Buildings, with diagrams and approved additional clauses (Knight and Co.: London: 1883), p.87*

Rapid urbanisation, population growth, infilling, and a dominant laissez-faire capitalism meant that – in general – housing development at the beginning of the Victorian period was largely unregulated and generally unconcerned with altruism or philanthropy. A commentator from Bradford described how 'an individual who may have a couple of thousand pounds,' but 'does not know exactly what to do with it' apart from wanting to 'lay it out so as to pay him the best percentage in money,' 'will purchase a plot of ground, an acre or half an acre; then what he thinks about is to place as many houses on this acre of ground as he possibly can, without reference to drainage or anything, except that this will pay him a good percentage for his money; that is the way the principal part of Bradford has sprung up…'[11]

A fatal outbreak of cholera in 1838 soon exposed the limitations of such unfettered free-market *laissez-faire*-ism. The Select Committee on the Health of Towns (PP 1840 XI) was set up in 1840, to investigate what had caused such a large number of deaths. Cholera is waterborne, but the early Victorians believed disease to be spread by foul miasmas, or bad air. A malignant and impure atmosphere was, noted the Select Committee, 'much increased by peculiar faults in the form and construction of the humble dwellings of the poorer classes. This seems owing to the want of all proper regulations in any General Building Act… for preserving due space and ventilation.'[12] The Report recommended that the practice of building back-to-back should cease without delay and that, instead, 'before and behind every row of houses… a certain space should be left open, proportioned to the height of the house.'[13]

This recommendation was seized on by moralists as well as sanitarians. A back yard and good ventilation would encourage the man of the house to stay at home and use his leisure time constructively rather than visiting the ale house. A Select Committee witness reported that in Leeds, meanwhile, back-to-back dwellings provided no space for the drying of laundry, much inconveniencing not only the inhabitants but the gentleman passer-by on horseback, who could not pass through an average street unimpeded: 'Out of the total number of 586 [in the borough], 276, or nearly half, are weekly so full of lines an linen as to be impassable for horses and carriages.'[14] Provide each house with a yard of its own, and at least that problem is solved.

Following the 1840 Select Committee Report, a number of bills regulating housing and space were put before Parliament. Lord Normanby's first bill of 29 January 1841 stated that all new houses should be built with a back yard one quarter of the size of the footprint of the house itself. His

[11] PP 1840 XI p.89
[12] PP 1840 XI, p. viii
[13] PP 1840 XI, p. xv
[14] PP 1840 XI, p.98

second bill, of 7 May 1841, downgraded this provision to back plots one sixth the size of the footprint. These bills formed the basis of the 1844 Metropolitan Building Act (7 & 8 Vict. c.84), which specified that each new house in London should have a back yard of at least 100ft² (9m²), but on a national level feelings were beginning to cool on the subject of individual back plots. The 1842 Select Committee on the Regulation of Buildings (PP 1842 X) still held the idea of them dear, but most of their witnesses issued dark warnings about increased costs if private back plots were to be included. One witness estimated that the building cost per house would rise by thirty or thirty-five percent if a private yard was attached; another witness suggested that 'there would be a great sacrifice of land'.[15] Faced with a drop in profits, private back plots, at least as far as national legislation was concerned, were put on a back burner.

The 1844 Royal Commission into the State of Large Towns (PP 1844 XVII) bewailed the lack of open spaces in towns, and a corresponding lack of ventilation, but the commissioners had turned their attention to flues, fireplaces, and gratings as the means best suited to introduce fresh air into small, stuffy rooms and buildings, and sewerage, drainage, and internal water-closets were seen as the new saviours of the Victorian city. A private plot was desirable, but not practicable. Indeed, claimed some witnesses, a series of private back yards would 'form wells of stagnant air at the back of a house; and as they are certain to be the site of privies, unless these are most efficiently arranged, they may be both noisome and unwholesome'.[16]

Despite the lack of national legislation, local councils across the country began issuing their own building, housing, and improvement acts, many of which followed the form of bye-laws issued in 1859 by the Local Government Act Office (PP 1859 XI). These had themselves built upon the stipulations in the 1848 Public Health Act (11 & 12 Vict. c.63) and the 1847 Town Improvement Clauses Act (10 & 11 Vict. c.34). These bye-laws specified an open space of at least 150ft² to the rear or at the side of each new dwelling house. However, the clause had an addendum: when 'these dimensions cannot be adhered to without considerable sacrifice of property, they may be modified in special cases at the discretion of the Local Board'.[17]

Eventually, as the 'heroic age' of advances in public health activism and legislation culminated with the 1875 Public Health Act (38 & 39 Vict. c.55), and the Local Government Board issued its model building bye-laws, private back plots should have become the norm, and this ought to be borne out by the data. Private plot provision increased over the course of the nineteenth century, and by 1870

[15] PP 1842 X, p.19
[16] PP 1844 XVII, p.35
[17] PP 1859 XI, p.42

over 50% houses in Preston, Northampton and Dorchester had private yards or gardens. But in Sheffield and Bradford private plot provision was still limited. This could lead to a conclusion that either the data or theory is wrong, but it is suggested instead that as the bye-laws were models and guidelines only, and that there would have been a significant time lag between the enactment of legislation and the practical results, the theory still stands.

It is plain that the 1882 Select Committee on Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvements reveals a different attitude to outside spaces. No longer are back plots simply ventilation spaces or 'yards', but they are referred to as gardens – places for pleasure – for the first time; reflecting, in part, a later-century rekindled desire for the rural and the vernacular. The model villages of the earlier period (such as Saltaire, begun 1853) were now *garden cities* (Bournville and Letchworth, for example). And, in the testimony of the witnesses, many of whom were working men, there is a strong indication that a house with a garden is infinitely preferable to a high-rise flat with a communal drying area. Charles Hodson, a clerk from Hoxton, had previously been living in an Improved Industrial Dwellings Company block, but had moved away to bring up a family. When asked if he would go back there if he could, he replied that he 'would not, because I have a garden in which my children can play.' In Hoxton, asked the Committee Chairman, somewhat incredulously? 'Yes' was his firm response.[18]

By the time of a 1908 Board of Trade report into working class housing and rents, it was plain that there was a distinction between gardens and yards, and also that the presence and size of a back plot of any type materially affected the value of a house and the rents paid for it. By 1909, and the very first national act regulating housing of all kinds (9 Edw. 7 c.44), which finally forbad the building of back-to-backs, houses with private plots were the legal requirement, and a very English tradition had begun. In some cases, original ventilation spaces may have been converted, and planted. In others, houses were simply being built with larger plots – designed as gardens in name and meaning to fulfil new and different expectations. Horticulture had always been popular in England (the desire to grow and see green stuff is perhaps universal), but it was not until the nineteenth century, when the spaces on the ground were codified, that the garden as we know it today took shape. It is strange to think that the urban back garden, so often considered today a very private space for very personal expression, likely began life in the regularities and practicalities of Victorian ventilation spaces.

Conclusions

[18] PP 1882 VII, p.147

Using cartographic and census evidence, this article has constructed the first empirical assessments of the number of households which had gardens or yards in the nineteenth century. In Sheffield, Bradford, Preston, Northampton and Dorchester, plot provision varied according to social class of occupant and period of house construction, but often not in the patterns that have previously been assumed. The provision and size of private plots broadly increased over the course of the nineteenth century, but garden provision was not so closely tied to social class of occupant, especially in Preston and Northampton. Plot type and size varied considerably between towns; even between the broadly similarly industrialised towns of Sheffield, Bradford and Preston. These findings have implications for discussions of urban standards of living in the nineteenth century: the presence or absence of private outside spaces, whether they were economically-productive allotment-like plots, cramped and insanitary extensions to the privy, or places for leisure and recreation, and add new dimensions to our understanding of urban housing as 'disamenities.'

The evidence of parliamentary reports and further qualitative sources suggests that it was the legislative and sanitary discourses from the 1840s through to the 1890s that were in part responsible for the creation of the twentieth-century expectation of a house with its own back garden. The desire for a thorough draught of air from the front of the house to the back was instrumental in the campaign against the building of houses back-to-back; the logical but unacknowledged consequence of this was the continued dominance in England of the common row-house with its own back plot.