

Mary Ann Gilbert - the full story

Mary Ann Gilbert was born into the wealthy and prominent Gilbert family in 1776. At the age of 6 she lost her father, Thomas Gilbert, a Lewes grocer. According to Mary Ann she and her mother was left penniless and had to sell their furniture and move to her grandmothers in Hastings. Her mother then passed away in 1805 and Mary Ann stayed often with her Uncle, Charles Gilbert, who was a very wealthy landowner in Eastbourne. Mary-Ann married Davies Giddy, a Cornish Landowner, on the 18th April 1808. Amongst all his roles in the Parliament was as a Chairman of the Board and Agriculture, Mary-Ann was passionately concerned about the low agriculture productivity and the rural poor's dire situation, Davies was more interested in how the Parish Rate for the support of the unemployed might be reduced.

In 1814 her Uncle Charles passed away and left Mary Ann a vast Legacy of land and properties and to her husband, if he changed his surname to Gilbert, this he did and at a later point all their children also changed to Gilbert. Mary Ann and her husband, went on to have 8 children, whom of three daughters and a son survived her husband who died 1839, majority of their marriage had been spent mainly in two houses, situated in Old Town.

Mary Ann's agricultural experiment begins around 1830 when she set out on a practical and moral mission to resolve the problem of rural poverty and to restore independence to the landless poor, through an innovative allotment system.

The 1830s were a period of great hardship among rural labourers; in 1830-31 the Swing riots reached their heights in Sussex, with an outburst of rick burning as the landless protested their dreadful conditions. Some relief was available through the parishes, but poverty, hunger and humiliation were the order of the day. The poor was seen to be being feckless, Idle and work shy by most parishes. This Mary Ann strongly disagreed against

Mary Ann, she not only believed that useful work would redeem the poor, but also if the poor could support themselves through productive work, this would ease the burden on parish poor relief.

So, Mary Ann set up a pilot scheme to cultivate waste land, she owned with her husband, at Beachy Head, Whitbread Hollow Allotments, or as we know it today, the sport pitches between Cow Gap and Eastbourne. She hired 27 paupers to remove clay and soil from nearby marshland, transport it to the beach and take flint and pebbles back to the marshland. They brought the waste land to cultivation, and successfully produced a healthy crop of potatoes, seeing the possibilities, the paupers were keen to rent from Mary Ann.

By 1832 she had nearly 200 people/families renting allotments of her, growing mainly mangelwurzels, turnips and potatoes, some were even keeping cows and pigs on their lots and they all had managed to pay their rent through their own hard work.

Despite the obvious success she still had to provide evidence to the parish, by sending out a wealth of reports and detailed complex calculations, letters and papers about her scheme, to emphasis her point she also sent a sample of the potatoes to Lord Liverpool who also didn't share her faith in the paupers, claiming they were drew more heavily on the parish than the rest of the counties. Mary Ann hotly disputed this claiming to have said; there is far more intelligence amongst labourer than those suppose who questioned them, they eagerly read the papers in hopes of the proposed Poor Relief Law Amendment and say they believe the government has forgotten them.

It is also around this time that Mary Ann became a member of the Labourers' friend Society, for its aims coincided with her own.

Having proved Labourers would work even on land that they had to reclaim themselves she was convinced that the amelioration of their condition was bound up with allotting them land at a fair rent which they could cultivate by spade husbandry. The allotment system and educating labourer in good husbandry were the keys to restoring independence to the peasantry of Sussex, especially if supported by sound moral teaching! So, when she let land to be turned into allotments, the tenants each got a card bearing pointed advice:

Two glasses of gin every day at three half pence glass cost four pounds eleven shillings and three pence a year, which would pay for:

- A man's shirt
- A pair of men's stockings
- A pair of Women's stockings
- Shift and muslin Cap
- Printed cotton gown
- A man's cotton Shirt
- A man's fustian Coat
- A pair of blankets
- A neck handkerchief
- A pair of man's shoes
- A pair of Women's shoes
- A flannel petticoat
- A Coarse Cloth Cloak
- A quilted waistcoat
- Fustian Trousers lined
- A pair of cotton sheets.

She also, as a way, to teach morality had an iron gateway- the first of its kind in Sussex- leading into the allotments, on its sign it was proclaiming: **Here waste not Time and you'll not want Food.** Mary Ann's aim in life was to teach people to make use of their opportunities.

Mary Ann trained her allotment holders by taking up residence on her farm up on Beachy Head where she taught them to use a spade rather than ploughs, Seaweed and liquid manure were introduced to use as fertilizer, she also introduced water butts for preservation of water. Mary Ann would lend money to holders to buy livestock and

equipment, provided them with tanks to collect rain water and introduced a water filtering system.

By 1835 there were 235 allotment tenants, nearly all of whom were managing to pay their rent on time through their crops. By 1844, over 400 allotment holders and in the 13 years since the allotment started only one of her tenants had been convicted of any crime and not one had failed to pay the rent; having an allotment also kept them too busy to spend time in beer shops. Her scheme reduced the poor rate by more than half, despite an increase in the poor population.

The Labourer's Friend Society commented that the scheme meant a poor man 'gives to his country, by thus giving to his family, a considerable income, he saves to his country, by not being a burden to his parish, another considerable increase.

In the 1840 she went further, founding two agricultural schools, one at Willingdon and the other at East Dean and more followed. They too were self-supportive and encapsulated all her ideas. Teachers did not get a salary, but were paid a penny by each pupil weekly.

The schools, which were designed for the children of the allotment tenants, taught reading, writing, account keeping, Bible studies and husbandry. Each school had its own water butt and cow stalls. The school masters were chosen from the work houses or from people about to enter the workhouse.

George Cruttenden, the first master of Willingdon school, describes how his school functioned: I taught between 9am till midday and after a two hour break the children assembled again and between 3 to 5pm they were engaged in helping me cultivate the land. Of this voluntary act, he said "I have not lost one from dissatisfaction and I am glad they willingly assist me.

For the School he paid an annual rent of £10, and £15 for the five acres of land which he farmed. This, he claimed he easily paid through the sale of his produce, although he had no salary and had to maintain wife and four children.

The school institutionalized all the ideas that had become identified with Mrs Gilbert. The building had attached to it the usual shed for stall feeding of cows, the tank at the rear to draw off the liquid manure, the tanks to collect roof water, a pig sty, beehives, and storage above ground for grain.

When Mary Ann passed away at home in 1845, it was already generally realised that she was one of the pioneers who sought to abolish poverty by encouraging labourers to grow their own food on land let at economical rates. This is her greatest title to regard, that with vision and humanity she rescued the "forgotten men" from their position of dependence on the landowners, and through spade husbandry taught them self-respect.

Mary Ann had her critics and spent a lot of time working tirelessly on proving them wrong and she prevailed, demonstrated, wrote articles and produced pamphlets to be distributed all over the Country and beyond, she hosted visits up on the farm where she was teaching the allotment tenants and their families. She was strong, practical, stubborn and quite unlady like for a woman of her status of that time in history, yet she was ahead

of her time in many ways. Allotments today is based in a similar way, apart from not being allowed to keep cows and pigs. Most allotment holders still use spade husbandry, on their plots and grow for themselves and their families. It is still reasonable priced to rent a plot.

Many of her critics were simply objecting because they wanted the paupers to be available when they needed them on their land for seasonal casual work.

The political economist, John Stuart Mill believed that the allotments were a way of “making people grow their own poor rate and that, with full employment and good wages, they would be unnecessary. Interestingly, during the two world wars the allotments once again proved their worth

I can clearly see the parallels of then and now, with poor feeling abandoned by the Government today as well as then. As poor were leaning on the parish back then and the poor leans on the Government today, and are still judged as being idle and work shy by some in our Society today.

She was seen an eccentric lady of her time, visitors to the Manor house would often find her in rather odd situations. One visitor came across her halfway into the chimney stack, cleaning or oiling it.

Another visitor was met by her emerging from a well which she had been inspecting.

Mary Ann also saved all residue of medications from her family, made concoctions to give to her ailing workers. I could not find any evidence to how much these concoctions helped.

As a first-time researcher I never imagined how I would feel about "my Lady". I feel close to Mary Ann as a person, almost protective of her and so proud of her achievements! I like her eccentricity, stubbornness and intellect, I admire her strength, her belief and her helping and protecting the poor to help themselves. Then as well as now, sometimes in life, all you need is someone to believe in you and give you a chance.