

# THREE ACR

In April 2011, the Communities Secretary Eric Pickles named the Smallholdings and Allotments Act 1908 among those ancient pieces of legislation, tying the hands of local authorities, which were up for review. This was the Liberal legislation which, among other things, still requires local authorities to provide land for allotments when there is demand for it. There was a huge outcry in the press and the rapidly expanding allotments movement promised to fight this tooth and nail. *The Independent* immediately launched a 'Dig for Victory' campaign against it, aware of how powerful the allotments movement has become.<sup>1</sup> David Cameron moved rapidly to reassure people that the 1908 law would stay. **David Boyle** looks at the story of the 1908 Smallholdings and Allotments Act, and the campaign that resulted in it, led by Liberal MP Jesse Collings.



# RES AND A COW

**T**HIS MODERN RESONANCE makes the 1908 legislation important. But the history of the Smallholdings and Allotments Act was not quite what it appears on the face of it, and the legislation was not quite the uncontroversial breakthrough that it now seems. On the face of it, the Smallholdings Act was the culmination of a campaign for more smallholdings and allotments stretching back four decades by the Liberal campaigner Jesse Collings. In practice, when it came to the point, Collings was its bitterest critic and opponent. The debate on the Smallholdings Act at the time was a showpiece clash between the Liberals and their erstwhile colleagues in the Liberal Unionists. It was a division that stymied the Liberal land campaign which, back in the 1880s, had looked set to sweep all before it. The same divisions may even remain to this day.

To understand the debate, and why it was so bitter, we have to go back to the standard critique put forward by the back-to-the-land movement, a tradition which often dovetailed with aspects of Liberalism but which was primarily articulated by people very much on the fringes of the Liberal Party (William Morris, before his conversion to socialism), or proto-Liberals who pre-dated it (William Cobbett, Thomas Jefferson), or who were actually opposed to Liberalism (John Ruskin and those who

followed him). It regarded the great original sin of Whig politics as the Enclosures, which drove poor people off the land, undermining their independence and creating a new class of paupers condemned to eke out a dependent existence in the new cities.

‘The agricultural labourer of modern times is in a position quite different from that of the agricultural labourer of former years,’ said Collings in his 1908 book *Land Reform*, written as part of the debate on the law which Pickles wanted to remove.<sup>2</sup> ‘In former times, the agricultural labourer was a man who generally possessed land and almost invariably had rights in common in connection with the cartilage of his cottage. This enabled him to keep stock of various kinds and of more or less value, the proceeds of which, added to his earnings as a labourer, placed him in a fairly prosperous condition. The modern agricultural labourer is a mere wage receiver.’

Liberal politics in the mid-nineteenth century had tended to be an urban phenomenon, a product in its own way of the Industrial Revolution. But the agricultural depression of the 1870s brought agrarian campaigners into prominent positions in the Liberal Party. Joseph Arch, the farm workers’ leader, was elected as MP for North West Norfolk in the crucial year of 1886. But the most prominent of them all was a bricklayer’s son from Devon called Jesse Collings, the future

Jesse Collings  
(1831–1920)

Liberal MP for Ipswich and then Birmingham Bordesley.

Collings had become a commercial traveller, took over the company he worked for, and became a close friend of Joseph Chamberlain at the beginning of his political career in Birmingham. He understood from his own experience the importance of a patch of land for those in poverty. His father had rented four acres next to their house. ‘On these four acres we grew wheat, barley, potatoes, and other vegetables,’ he wrote in his autobiography. ‘We kept a number of pigs and a large number of fowls. For myself I had a fancy for rabbits, guinea-pigs, hedgehogs, and ferrets. We grew each year sufficient wheat to supply the family with bread.’<sup>3</sup>

It was his fervent support for the north in the American Civil War which brought him into formal politics, then his admiration for the American school system. By the 1870s, he was a town councillor representing Edgbaston, working in Birmingham with Chamberlain on the project to create a city that was ‘parked, paved, assized, marketed, gas & watered and improved’ (Collings’ phrase). He was also among the organisers, with Arch, of the Agricultural Labourers Union, a Midlands phenomenon originally, formed on Good Friday 1872 under a chestnut tree in Wellesbourne. His work on the union led to the invitation to stand for parliament as a Liberal.

## THREE ACRES AND A COW

Collings came to believe that the best solution to urban poverty, and the best way of providing a dignified independence to agricultural workers, was to repopulate rural areas and rebuild the peasant class. That meant providing land for anyone who wanted it to meet their own needs. He and the union drew up the first of a whole series of bills that would give poor people rights over land, to 'restore the connection, now almost destroyed, between the cultivator and the soil'. If he could get it enacted, he said, it 'would largely diminish pauperism; and would increase the numbers, and raise the social condition of the rural population'.<sup>4</sup>

The key reform was for the state to help labourers become their own landlords. It was an idea bitterly opposed by the big landowners, perhaps unsurprisingly, who regarded it as the first stage of a radical expropriation of their inheritance. It was also opposed by the farmers, afraid that it would make their labourers too independent, and much of Collings' campaigning was designed to persuade them it would also benefit them.

That was the challenge. But Liberal politics in the mid-nineteenth century was optimistic when the Back to the Land tradition was deeply pessimistic. It was Non-conformist when the tradition was often Anglo-Catholic. It believed in the inevitability of progress when the tradition was deeply sceptical of it. So Collings' deft weaving together of Liberalism and rural radicalism was a new phenomenon, at least new since the days of Cobbett and his *Rural Rides*.

There was also a theological dimension because the few allotments that existed in rural areas were usually under the control of the local churches or the charities they controlled. Trustees often interpreted their responsibilities so tightly that nobody who really needed allotments could possibly find their way onto them.<sup>5</sup> But the understanding of the importance of common land and preservation was beginning to grow in the 1870s as the Commons Preservation Society got under way and William Morris launched his Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. New versions of common land were in the air and, as the 1880s dawned, the land question – especially at its

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sharpest in rural Ireland – was right at the forefront of political debate.

The debate was spearheaded by Chamberlain's increasingly radical energies, Chamberlain campaigning in the cities, and Collings in the rural areas. They were a formidable couple, utterly loyal to each other, though Collings made fun of Chamberlain incessantly. They were also a formidable sight on the stump, Collings with his huge side whiskers, Chamberlain with his trade mark monocle and orchid in the breast of his long coat.

Chamberlain had set land reform at the heart of his 'unauthorised programme', which – although it was considered dangerously radical at the time – was actually designed partly to undermine socialism. It was formulated to provide ordinary people with a measure of economic independence by distributing small plots of land, as well as setting out a programme of education, democratic reform and decentralisation: it was a new kind of populist Liberalism.

'If you go back to the early history of our social system,' he said in his speech on the Reform Bill of 1885, 'you will find that ... every man was born into the world with natural rights, with a right to share in the great inheritance of the community, with a right to a part of the land of his birth.'<sup>6</sup>

The great land magnates were appalled, but when the grand old man of Liberalism, John Bright, threw his weight behind the land campaign, it was clear that policy was moving on apace. 'The time is near in my opinion,' he said, 'when the great land monopoly of this country will be assailed and when it will be broken into and broken up.'<sup>7</sup> Chamberlain lit the touchpaper of the political fireworks with an attack on the Conservative leader Lord Salisbury, describing him as 'the spokesman of a class – a class to which he himself belongs, *who toil not neither do they spin*'.<sup>8</sup>

Collings achieved his first success with the Allotments Extension Act of 1883. It was a small measure to prevent local parishes from frustrating access to allotments. But at the heart of the land battle was the question of giving two million agricultural labourers the vote, under the assumption that they would force through radical land legislation. There were huge

demonstrations after the House of Lords threw out the extended franchise in 1884, with farm labourers marching into London from Kent and Sussex in a pattern faintly reminiscent of the Peasants Revolt. The *Daily News* spoke patronisingly of 'men who carried fresh-cut walking sticks and who do not show the remotest affectation of the ways of town life'.

It was during the forthcoming general election in 1885, in a speech at Cirencester, that Collings first used his famous slogan 'Three acres and a cow'. It was not a new phrase and it was much ridiculed by his Conservative opponents, but it caught the zeitgeist, setting out clearly what he considered the minimum for a family to live on. Chamberlain adopted the slogan for his own programme, which set out how the state would buy land and let it to anyone who wanted it, at the rate of one acre of arable and four acres of pasture. It was the moment that the Liberal Party adopted some of the flavour of Ruskinian radicalism. 'The standard of welfare of the large family we call the nation should be not so much the amount of its aggregate money wealth,' wrote Collings in a close echo of Ruskin, 'but the moral, material and social condition of the great mass of its members.'<sup>9</sup>

Collings' new law had produced 394,517 allotments or smallholdings of under four acres and 272,000 'garden allotments'. He had been elected chairman of the new Allotment Extension Association to keep up the pressure. Historians sometimes argue that the Unauthorised Programme had little impact.<sup>10</sup> But the allotments element, which it gave birth to, was a political theme which echoed through the next six decades. Providing access to land was the proposed solution – not taxing land, the great campaign of the 1890s, because that accepted ownership patterns as they stood. For Collings, land was to be reorganised in such a way that anyone who wanted to access to it should be able to have it, whoever they were, wherever they lived.

It was at this point that his amendment to the Queen's Speech in January 1886, regretting that Lord Salisbury's Conservative government had no plans to help agricultural labourers find allotments and smallholdings, was

unexpectedly passed by the House of Commons. It brought down the government. This became known as the 'Three Acres and a Cow' amendment. At long last, the Liberal leader William Ewart Gladstone rose in his seat to support Collings during the debate, promising to 'restore the old local communities of this country something of that character of a community, in which the common interests of the individual labourer may be so managed as to associate him with the soil in a manner much more effectively than that by which he is associated with it at present'.<sup>11</sup> A few days later, Gladstone took office at the head of a new Liberal government. Collings had never been so hopeful, but it was all to turn to ashes within months.

The first sign of trouble came when he introduced his Allotments and Small Holdings Bill, designed to give parishes the power to provide allotments where there was a demand and nowhere was available at a reasonable rent. To his consternation, the new government failed to adopt it. Instead, Gladstone pushed forward his deeply controversial Irish Home Rule Bill, determined once and for all to end the centuries of dispute with Ireland. It was a brave move, but Collings and his colleagues were enraged that so much urgent radical legislation was being postponed for a Home Rule measure they hardly found convincing.

The divisions in the party saw Chamberlain and Collings both in the new grouping of Liberal Unionists. It was a traumatic period of betrayal and shattered friendships. Arch stayed with the Gladstonian Liberals while Collings and the land reformers followed Chamberlain. Collings was flung out of his own Allotments Extension Association, which was then in the hands of the Gladstonians. Instead, he set up the new Rural Labourers League, with Chamberlain in the chair, which became a formidable campaign organisation in its own right, with 25 paid local agents and 3,000 volunteers nationwide.

Despite this stressful and upsetting process, Collings went on campaigning, battling for his bill through increasingly elongated sessions until he could do no more. The issues were put to the test in a by-election in Spalding

in Lincolnshire, which was unexpectedly won by a Liberal on the allotments issue. By then, he had decided to save what he could, and split his bill into two. What was passed was the Allotments and Cottage Gardens Compensation for Crops Act 1887, which obliged local authorities to provide allotments if there was a demand for them. Allotments later became the key issue in the first county council elections in 1889. Even the evolution pioneer Alfred Russel Wallace joined in the campaign by applying for an allotment to the new Dorset County Council and then publicising the delays and barriers thrown in his way by reluctant officials. Even so, three years later, another 150,000 people had allotments.

In March 1891, Collings finally passed the other half, his Smallholdings Bill. It had taken him eleven years of constant campaigning, reintroducing the bill with every session, rather as Sir John Lubbock had done with his Ancient Monuments Act. But there was an irony here: the Smallholdings Bill was passed with Conservative votes. 'I have in the last five years seen more progress made with the practical application of my political programme than in all my previous life,' wrote Chamberlain shortly afterwards. 'I owe this result entirely to my former opponents, and all the opposition has come from my former friends.'

The new political divisions began to make themselves felt. Collings passionately believed that the smallholdings should be owned outright, as similar legislation allowed for in Ireland. He wanted his new peasant class to be proprietors, not dependent on landlords, even if those landlords were the county councils. He drafted his Purchase of Land Bill in 1895, designed to let ordinary farm tenants buy their farms, by advancing them the money to do so, and doing the same for people who wanted to be smallholders. He reintroduced it every year until 1914. It never made it into law.

The problem was that the politics of the debate was changing. Gladstone's final administration gave powers to parish councils to acquire allotments, but they were to be rented, not sold or given away. The land tax debate was now emerging and Collings' former

colleagues in the Liberals were less interested in providing new forms of land ownership. They were increasingly interested in using the tax system to take away the power of the landowners – not adding to their number.

Collings' influence on Chamberlain's son Austen was bringing the Conservatives round to the idea of a new class of owners on the land – as long as the smallholdings were not so big that labourers became independent of farmers.<sup>12</sup> The Conservative Lord Onslow launched his Association for the Voluntary Extension of the Allotments System as a way to head off their fears that the Liberals would nationalise the land.

At the same time, Collings' smallholdings campaign was attracting the determined opposition of the new Labour Party. Ramsay Macdonald himself opposed him in a ten-minute-rule-bill debate in 1907. The idea of land ownership, even by the poorest, was anathema to socialists. Collings' other political problem was that his Liberal Unionists now barely existed. Chamberlain had become a ferocious imperialist, and Colonial Secretary in the government, and the Liberal Unionist party organisation was to be wound up completely in 1912.

Worse, as far as Collings was concerned, the Liberal landslide at the beginning of 1906 had swept the Unionists from power. Chamberlain took the opportunity to swoop on a weakened Conservative Party and to effectively seize the leadership for his radical imperialism. But just as his moment of triumph, he was struck down by a paralysing stroke.

Lloyd George maintained the old Collings line as late as 1910. 'I hope Liberalism will see its way to go even further than ensuring security of tenure for those who cultivate the soil,' he told the audience at the Queen's Hall in London.<sup>13</sup> 'Our chairman has already indicated that in his judgement there should be some great measure which would transfer the ownership of the soil from the great landowners to the cultivating peasants.'

But the politics was different now. The main thrust of the new Liberal government was to build on the idea of security of tenure and they saw it differently to Collings.

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'The magic of property, such as it is, is derived not from ownership but from security,' said Asquith, the Home Secretary.<sup>14</sup> So when the Liberals' twin Smallholdings and Allotments Bills emerged, in 1907 and 1908, security not ownership was the objective. In fact, would-be smallholders had to find a fifth of the purchase money themselves. This was the proposal of a commission chaired by the banker Sir Edward Holden, who said that a new land bank should only advance four-fifths of the price at 4 per cent interest. New smallholding tenants would have to pay the interest on the loan to buy the land for their farms, but the ownership would still stay with the county councils. 'It is, in short a communalization of the land, not at the expense of the hated landlord, but at that of the 'sweated' tenant,' said a furious Collings.<sup>15</sup>

The smallholdings aspect of the new law was a failure: less than 5,000 new smallholders took the plunge, mainly in market gardens near the big cities, but it was different for allotments. The 1907 Act was consolidated into the 1908 Act, but Jesse Collings, the great advocate of allotments – the key figure in their history in the UK – voted against it. His remaining allies tried to extend the rights of tenant farmers to buy their farms with state help when they were for sale, but their amendment was lost by fifty-six votes.

By the end of the decade, even Lloyd George was on the other side. 'Great Britain, in my judgement, is utterly unsuited to the establishment of a great peasant proprietorship,' he said.<sup>16</sup> It was a bitter blow to Collings, who was now in ill health and desperate to give up his parliamentary seat. The great cause he had given his political career to seemed to have finally been defeated. What he had actually achieved, embedding allotments into the new local government machine, was vital for the future, but it was so little compared to the scale of his ambition: to get people back on the land.

Lloyd George launched his own land campaign in 1913, borrowing Collings' radical language about the rural English, but to argue instead for land tax, conjuring up a vision of the sturdy, traditional peasant:

He had his common (cheers) where he could graze a cow that would give him milk and butter for himself and his children. There was a little patch where he could raise corn to feed them. There he had his poultry, his geese, his pigs; a patch of land where he could raise green produce for the table. He was a gentleman; he was independent. He had a stake in his country. His title was as ancient and apparently as indefensible as that of the lord of the manor. Where had it gone to? Stolen.<sup>17</sup>

It was radical. It may have resulted in major extensions to land available for allotments if the First World War had not intervened, but it wasn't what Collings had campaigned for. In March 1909, a disappointed Collings slipped on the icy footboard of a train at Charing Cross Station, fell on the platform and fractured his hip. He never entirely recovered, but he was paradoxically to see a peculiar and extremely sudden revival of his political fortunes.

Rather unexpectedly, the war provided the opportunity to shift the debate again because producing food suddenly became urgent and vitally important. Britain could no longer feed her own population, and the U-boat blockade made food imports difficult and dangerous. Food also took up space in the holds of merchant ships that could have been used for arms. The time had come to revitalise Britain's agricultural base.

The Dig for Victory campaign of the Second World War remains a part of British folk memory, but its equivalent in the First World War has been forgotten. Yet right at the heart of it all was Collings' Rural Labourers' League, encouraging village industries, linking them up with local smallholdings, and eventually concentrating on promoting the idea of potato and livestock clubs. Soon 400 of these clubs had begun, with an average membership of about thirty each – and involving about 24,000 pigs.

But the League was no longer the central player. The major revival of allotments in 1916 was brought about by the new Conservative agriculture minister, the Earl of Crawford, and his alliance with the Vacant Land Cultivation

Society, a new pressure group set up in 1907 by the American soap millionaire Joseph Fels, following a series of controversial land invasions on the outskirts of cities by people who wanted to grow food. Fels had been at the forefront of the vacant lot societies that had emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in so many American cities, as a way of linking 'idle land with idle labour'.

By November 1916, Lloyd George was about to take over the coalition government, which would leave both Asquith and Crawford out of office. But by then, the key policy shift had been made. Crawford called in the Vacant Land Cultivation Society to ask their advice about what he was planning. Included in the meeting was the society's enthusiastic organising director for London, Gerald Butcher.

Butcher explained that after 'an interview lasting an hour or more, [we] left with the full knowledge that probably the greatest drama which had taken place in land reform for many generations was about to be enacted ...'

For once, at any rate, the privilege of the few was to become the right of the many. By virtue of the powers conferred by the Defence of the Realm Regulations, the government was about to lay its hand upon the most sacred of monopolies, the most jealously guarded of all vested interests; it intended, briefly, to commandeer certain land in order that allotments might be provided on a large and unprecedented scale.<sup>18</sup>

Two weeks later, Crawford made his plans public. The result was the Cultivation of Lands Order 1916. It gave county councils the right to take over wasteland or abandoned land, without the consent or even knowledge of its owners, and use it to grow food. Crawford had been nervous that the order would outrage people, but in fact the local authorities were overwhelmed with demand from people applying to turn specific bits of land into allotments, or to take over part of the new allotments themselves.

The allotments of the First World War were a social phenomenon and their effects were to echo

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through society long after the plots had been handed back to the housing developers. Many of those using them for growing vegetables had no idea how to distribute their produce, and refused to sell it – but gave it away around the neighbourhood as a sign of largesse. Those who did sell it found, on average that allotment growing could produce food to the value of £80 an acre – in the days when a hefty bag of potatoes cost 5d (about 2p).<sup>19</sup> The argument for allotments as a tool of poverty reduction seemed to have been won.

The desperate need for home grown food in the First World War had also converted Lloyd George to the old Liberal Unionist position, leading to the Land Settlement (Facilities) Bill of December 1918, designed to resettle returning soldiers on the land. Collings was ill, but his friends rallied round and organised a successful amendment allowing smallholders to buy their land after six years, and to pay back the money over sixty years.

Two years later, another 208,000 acres had been acquired for former soldiers. Collings died on 20 November 1920, believing that his campaign had achieved its objectives. He could look back on an extraordinary focused life of commitment to the cause, stretching from the days of town planning, *Ideal Home* magazine and hens in suburban back gardens, right back to Cobbett, the Great Reform Act, and the Captain Swing riots. He was old enough to have signed the petition calling for the repeal of the Corn Laws in the 1840s and to have regretted doing so. It was a long lifetime, nine decades, of unprecedented change.

Actually, Collings was wrong. The kind of transformation in land ownership and small-scale agriculture he imagined, and could see in other European countries on his summer jaunts with Chamberlain, did not come to pass after all. The great opportunity that opened up for land reform on that scale was a victim Home Rule divisions in the Liberal Party and the frustration of Lloyd George's Land Campaign by the First World War. The 1885 slogan 'Three acres and a cow' continued to be associated with the Liberal Party well into the second half of the twentieth century, but with little understanding about its

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origins or objectives. When the generation after Collings began to pull together the lost and frayed strands of his campaign, they did so outside the Liberal Party.

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- 1 *The Independent*, 1 May 2011.
- 2 J. Collings, *Land Reform* (Longmans, Green, 1908), p. xvii.
- 3 J. Collings and Sir John L. Green, *Life of the Rt Hon. Jesse Collings* (Longmans, Green, 1920).
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 5 Simon Grimble, *Landscape Writing and the Condition of England 1878–1917: Ruskin to modernism* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 86.
- 6 J. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain* (London, 1932), p. 549.
- 7 *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Mar. 1880.
- 8 Joseph Chamberlain speech, 30 Mar. 1883.

- 9 Collings and Green, *Life of Collings*, p. 181.
- 10 See Ian Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: The land issue and party politics in England 1906–1914* (Royal Historical Society/Boydell Press, 2001), pp. 12–13.
- 11 Collings and Green, *Life of Collings*, pp. 185–6.
- 12 See Paul Readman, *Land and Nation in England: Patriotism, national identity and the politics of land 1880–1914* (Royal Historical Society/Boydell Press, 2008), p. 20.
- 13 J. Collings, *The Colonization of Rural Britain* (Rural World, 1914), vol. 2, pp. 332–3.
- 14 Collings and Green, *Life of Collings*, p. 273.
- 15 Collings, *Colonization*, p. 339.
- 16 This was in July 1913, see Collings, *Colonization*, p. 333.
- 17 *The Times*, 12 Oct. 1913.
- 18 Gerald W. Butcher, *Allotments for All: The story of a great movement* (George Allen & Unwin, 1918), p. 18.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

## REVIEWS

### Scapegoat for Liberalism?

Antony Lentin, *Banker, Traitor, Scapegoat, Spy? The Troublesome Case of Sir Edgar Speyer* (Haus, 2013)

Reviewed by **David Dutton**

**T**HE FIRST WORLD War gave rise to countless acts of patriotic bravery and self-sacrifice. But it also prompted a large number of instances of ugly xenophobia. As is well known, the First Sea Lord, Prince Louis of Battenberg, second cousin of King George V, father of Louis Mountbatten and a nationalised British subject who had served in the Royal Navy from the age of fourteen, was forced from office in October 1914, solely on account of his German birth. The offence of Lord Haldane was equally slight. An admirer of German culture, he had once described Germany as his 'spiritual home'. At the same

time, however, as War Minister under Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, Haldane had done more than anyone else to prepare the British Expeditionary Force for military combat in 1914. This, however, did not spare the by-then Lord Chancellor from a vitriolic campaign in the right-wing press. The recipient of more than 2,500 abusive letters in a single day, Haldane was summarily dropped from the government at the formation of the first wartime coalition in May 1915 – the price Prime Minister Asquith was prepared to pay to ensure Conservative participation in the government and his own position at its head. Even innocent