



INDEX

Back to work

No honeymoon for the royal couple as national holiday ends
NEWS 5

Fast-track saint

Child abuse in Catholic church dogs beatification of John Paul II
WORLD NEWS 33-34

Paul Vallely

The monarchy is a robust cornerstone in a shifting world
COMMENT 40



In **i** on Sunday, the ultimate royal wedding party – fun for all the family

NEWS 2-32
WORLD NEWS 33-38
COMMENT 21 & 39-45
THE CRITICS 55-71
TRAVEL 73-81
BUSINESS 83-101



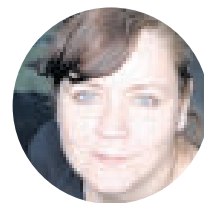
SPORT

The relegation dog-fight
Blackburn win, as Blackpool and Wigan can only draw

INSIDE YOUR 24-PAGE SECTION



THE NEW REVIEW



Veg with a view

Emma Townshend turns a balcony into a kitchen garden



WEATHER
Fine, sunny and breezy. Chance of rain in south-west 102



CROSSWORDS
Prize 102
Concise & Beelzebub
THE NEW REVIEW, 41

Exclusive report Fight begins over right to land

Growers revolt over threat to allotments

Plots could be lost all over Britain if coalition's plan to revoke century-old right is passed



By Jane Merrick and Mark Jesbury

The century-old right of people to demand an allotment from their council may be abolished by the Government under plans to scale back red tape, it emerged yesterday.

Eric Pickles, the Communities Secretary, is examining plans to free local authorities from a 103-year-old obligation to provide plots of public land for cultivation by gardeners. The proposals could see local authorities, many of them strapped for cash under government-imposed cuts, selling off allotment land for social housing or even for profit to major companies.

The move has triggered a wave of protest from allotment society members and gardeners, who have lobbied Mr Pickles to rethink the plans.

The *Independent on Sunday*, backed by the nation's leading gardeners and chefs, today launches a campaign, Dig for Victory, to force ministers to safeguard the public right to allotments. For more than a century, the allotment has been stitched into the fabric of British life, celebrated in the Second World War Dig for Victory

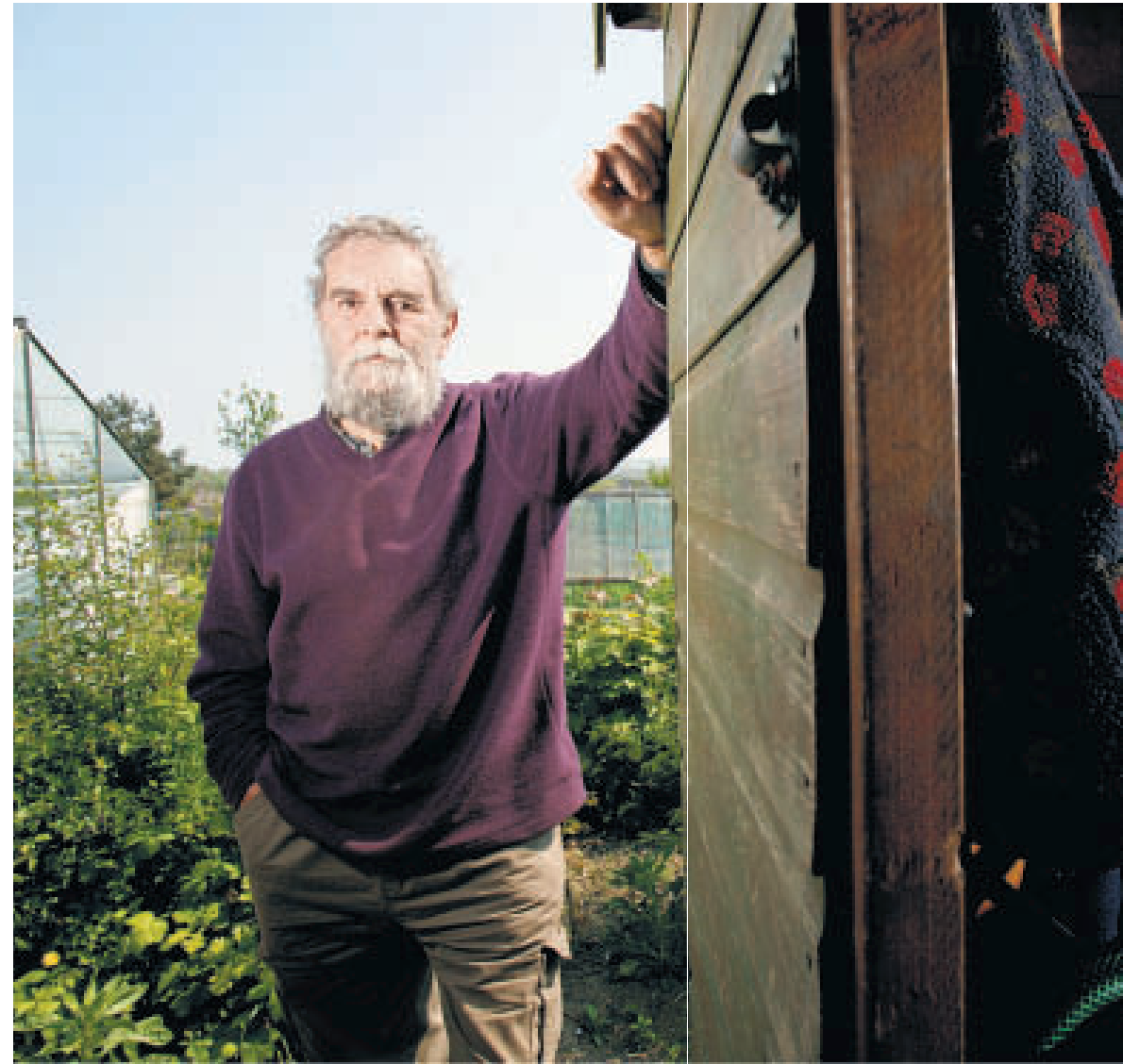
campaign, the self-sufficiency movement represented by the 1970s comedy *The Good Life*, and the current enthusiasm for growing your own.

Because of the zeal to cut local government bureaucracy, section 23 of the 1908 Smallholdings and Allotments Act, which orders that councils must provide sufficient number of plots to local residents where there is demand, is on a target list of "burdensome" regulations. The move comes just weeks after Caroline Spelman, the Environment Secretary, proposed a sell-off of the nation's forests, which led to a humiliating U-turn after an outcry from green campaigners.

Demand for allotments across the country is so huge since the grow-your-own movement mushroomed in the past decade that many councils have been forced to close waiting lists. Some gardeners are waiting up to 10 years for a plot – highlighting the national enthusiasm for growing fruit and vegetables.

The proposals are all the more surprising given claims by ministers that the Government is one of the greenest ever. David Cameron has spoken of his love of growing veg at his Oxfordshire home. He has also urged us to embrace his vision for the Big Society – a sense of community already familiar to allotment plot-holders.

The National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners and the grow-your-own community organisation Landshare, set up by the River Cottage chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, are spearheading opposition to the plans. Fearnley-Whittingstall said yesterday: "You can't overestimate the importance of allotments to urban communities. They're absolutely vital for social development, health and well-being. It's about more than just putting



Derek Bolton, 68

Retired environmentalist with a plot on Richmond Street Allotments, Stoke-on-Trent, for 25 years

My wife and I have three allotments between us. We have been doing it for 25 years. Ten years ago we couldn't give away the plots, but now most allotments have waiting lists, some up to 14 months. If we lost our plot we would be devastated. It's my and my wife's life. All the investment, not just the money but the time – that is important to us.

It is about the community around the allotment site. From families to retired people, we all work together. The average age of plot-holders has dropped more than 20 years and is now 45. Thirty-seven per cent of our plots are managed by females; that is the biggest change and it brings back life into the allotments.

We are currently planning an open day on our site because we can trace the history of gardening on our site back 150 years. People can come and meet us. There are going to be some tasting sessions with jams and chutneys. We have also produced two allotment recipe books using produce from our site.



Tom Graves, 24

A student teacher with plot at Greenhouse Allotments in Leeds, an eco-village complex

I cannot see the sense in getting rid of allotments. On a local level it gives people an opportunity to meet and get to know one another. At the same time we are doing something that is good for the

environment. People do not have to worry about going to the supermarket because they can grow their own food. Everyone who uses the allotments at Greenhouse Leeds is in their twenties. It isn't just a dying hobby; it is something that younger people will be interested in too. I can't think of any reason why their existence in this country should come under threat.



Alan Day, 68

Retired accountant. Has worked a plot since 1974 with the Chesterton Allotment Society, Histon Road, Cambridge

When I first went to the allotments we had somewhere in the region of 40 acres, which was over 500 plots. But from the late 1970s there was a threat of housing being built in some of the allotments; many people just moved off the allotments. We had long negotiations with the council over usage of the land, and by the early 1990s we lost 23 acres. Now we are left with 14 acres, about 200 plots. These plots are occupied and we now have a waiting list. If the council tried to take our land away again we would be horrified. We would not sit back and accept it. We would put up a fight.

'It gets the children out of the house and into the fresh air'

IAN WHITE
London allotment-holder

'Growing your own food is a very basic thing we all need'

ALAN TITCHMARSH
Television gardener

two veg on the family table; they're about community spirit. At a time when the country has plenty of other things to complain about, the Government goes after allotments at its peril."

Pippa Greenwood, a gardening expert and panellist on Radio 4's *Gardeners' Question Time*, said: "A climate of cutting back in the number of allotments doesn't bear thinking about. In many allotment sites there are people of all sizes and shapes, nationalities, ages, all in one area learning to get on together and enjoy one another's company. It is quite unbelievable that anybody can be so far removed from reality even to contemplate something that might reduce their number."

Ian White, 50, a computer programmer who has grown vegetables at One Tree Hill allotments in Honor Oak, south London for 12 years, said his plot was now part of everyday life for his family, including daughters Roberta, four, and Nico, two: "Just yesterday our family had a major seed planting day. It is very useful at other times

of the year when there is not much outdoor activity, like on a winter's day, to get them to wrap up well and go to the allotment for half an hour. It gets them out in the fresh air."

The 1908 legislation applies to England and Wales. In Scotland there is no such obligation, although the demand for land is not as great. The law does not apply in London because competition for space is so high.

Inviting responses from the public, the Department for Communities and Local Government says: "To date

ALLOTMENT FACTS



we have identified 1,294 statutory duties that central government currently places on local authorities, the majority of which arise from primary legislation – and we are aware that at this stage it is not a complete list.

"We are inviting you to comment on the duties and to challenge government on those which you feel are burdensome or no longer needed." The TV gardener Alan Titchmarsh said: "In an age of technology when more and more we're disconnected from the earth, it's so important to

have a space to grow your own food, to know its history, know it's healthy; in that sense growing your own is the sharp end of environmentalism.

"It would be very sad if the Government did anything to take away people's ability to do that, and I hope it doesn't happen."

Have your say at: sundayletters@independent.co.uk

Additional reporting by Charlie Cooper and Indigo Axford

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