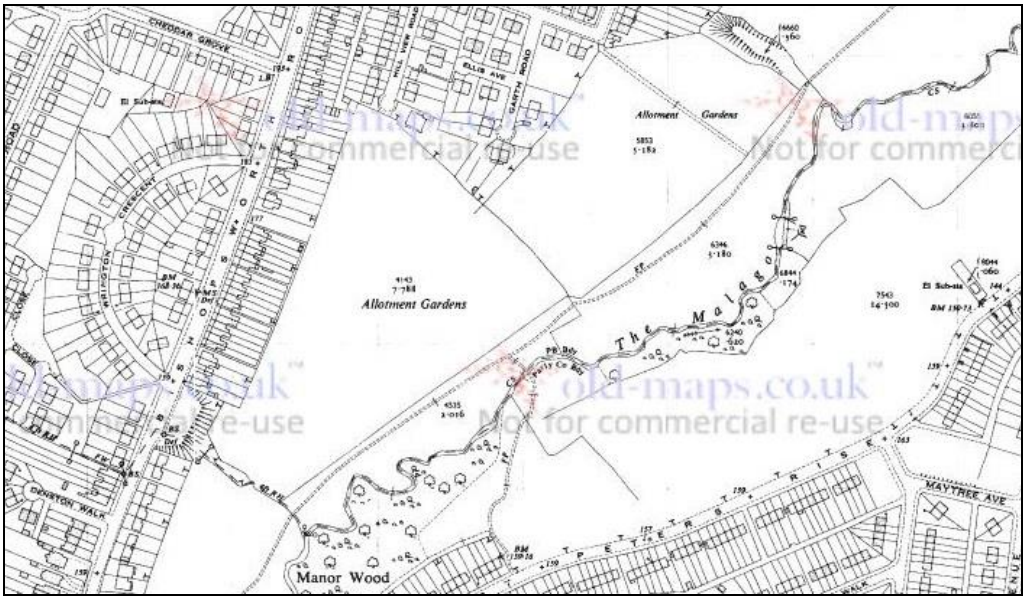
ALLOTMENT WOOD AND BUTCHERS BROOM SPINNEY

During the Second World War a large area of allotments was established on the southeast facing slope, northwest of the Malago. This will have been part of the ‘Dig for Victory' campaign, which commenced in October 1939, soon after the outbreak of war. The allotments probably remained in full use until at least 1954, when rationing finally came to an end. 1955 mapping shows the relevant area as ‘Allotment Gardens'. Working allotments were still present in the late 1950's/early 1960's (pers. comms.).

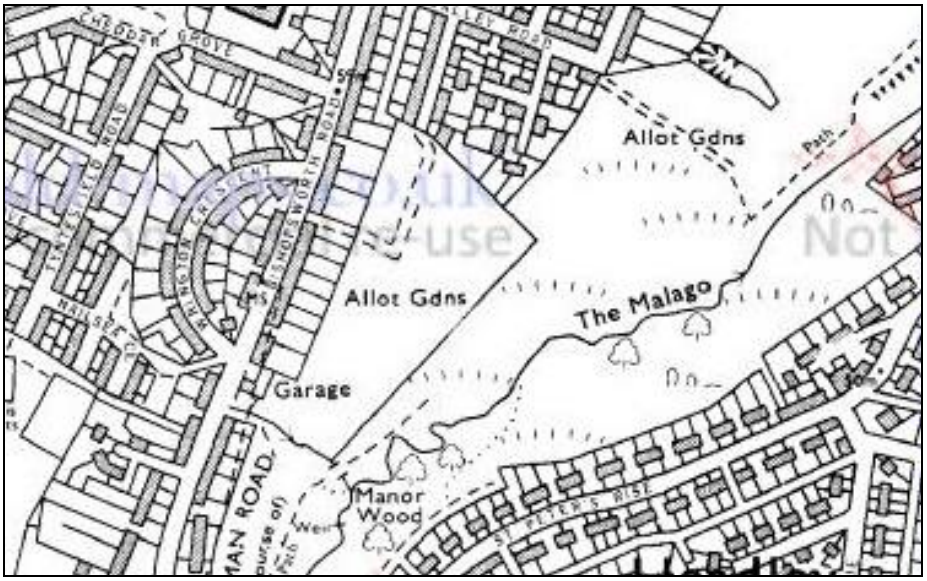


Extend of allotments in 1955

An allotmenteer recalls that in the early 1970's her allotment, in the plots established during the War, became so overgrown with Brambles that she abandoned it (pers. comms). Most of the remaining plots also appear to have been abandoned at about the same time, for in 1972 the majority of ‘Allotment Gardens' were mapped as rough grassland; however, an area of allotments in the northwest was preserved, fenced and are in use to this day.


View across part of the abandoned allotment site looking southwest from Garth Road – c. late1960’s

There was a small pit between the abandoned allotments and a ‘Playing Field' (now The Wildflower Meadow) to the northeast. The rough grassland became more rank, but was still relatively thin scrub in an aerial photograph of 1990. It gradually closed-over in a series of later images, until the 3.26ha semi-natural woodland Allotment Wood developed.

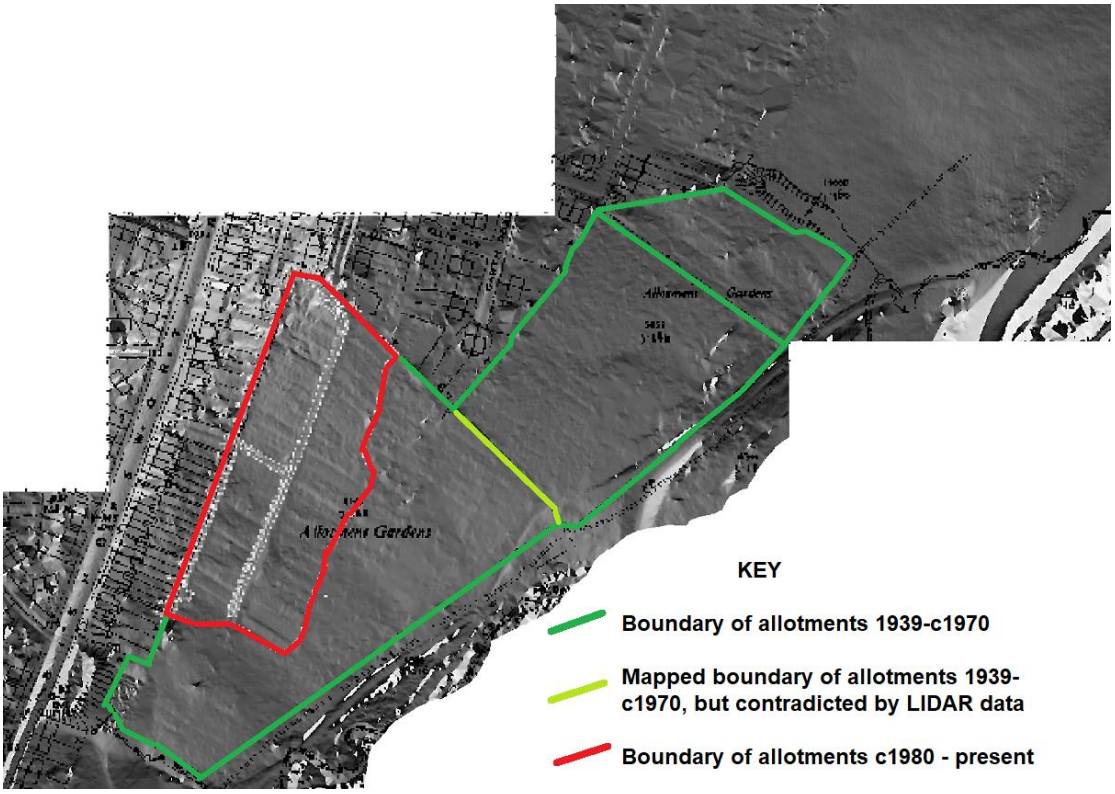


Smaller fenced-off allotment plot and rough grassland on remainder of allotment site in 1972

Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) is a technology, similar to radar, that can be used to create high-resolution digital elevation models (DEMs) with vertical accuracy as good as 10 cm. The equipment is generally mounted on a small aircraft. The laser scanner transmits brief laser pulses to the ground surface, from which they are reflected or scattered back to the laser scanner. Detecting the returning pulses, the equipment records the time that it took for them to go from the laser scanner to the ground and back. The distance between the laser scanner and the ground is then calculated based on the speed of light. The resulting image effectively strips away any vegetation, including trees, obscuring the earth’s surface.

A LIDAR survey that covers most of England, including South Bristol, was published by the Environment Agency in 2019. This survey is so sensitive that the outlines of the wartime allotments now within Allotment Wood can still be made out in the data, but cannot be detected on the ground with the naked-eye. The very slight differences in levels no doubt reflects the build-up of soil levels in the allotment beds with the lower paths between them.

The LIDAR data even indicates an error in the mapping of the allotments site post-1939. The outlines of allotment plots cross, and do not respect, an earlier hedgerow line, but for at least another thirty years, the hedgerow line continues to mapped as an on the ground feature that cannot have existed post-establishment of the allotments in 1939.



Allotment Wood

A University of the West of England (UWE) MSC student conducted a survey of Allotment Wood in the summer of 2018. The resulting report, entitled ‘A Phase One and National Vegetation Classification assessment to determine the age and vegetation structure of the new woodland present at the site of the historical war allotments of Manor Wood Valley, Bishopsworth', concluded that this area best corresponded with NVC community W8E i.e., Fraxinus excelsior (Ash) - Acer campestre (Field Maple), Mercurialis perennis (Dog's Mercury) with a sub community of Geranium robertianum (Herb Robert). The dominant species in the wood were noted as Field Maple, Sycamore, Hart's Tongue Fern, Hazel, Broad Buckler Fern, Ash, Ivy and English Elm. The reported stated that the notable absence of veteran trees/stumps and evidence of early-stage colonization by a variety of species indicated that the woodland was in an early stage of development. These conclusions matched the known history of area.

View from Garth Road looking southwest – 2021 – compare with the same view c. late 1960's above
Photo courtesy of Andy Lewis

In addition to the aforementioned species mentioned in the 2018 report, there are Hawthorns, Blackthorns, Dog Wood in the shrub layer. As in New Manor Woods, there are a few immature Hollies and Yews. Gooseberries and currants are becoming established as the tree canopy lifts. Ground flora is dominated by Ivy, with Ramsons and Lesser Celandine.

A single large Apple at the northeastern end of Allotment Wood is no doubt a relict of the allotment history of the site. The Apple is not a true variety, but may re-growth from a rootstock. The apples are similar to Bramleys, in being large, green and good for cooking.

The Apple

In the winter of 2016/7 Bristol City Council funded the Forest of Avon Trust to provide two days of coppicing training for Malago Valley Conservation Group (MVCG) volunteers, and the Avon Wildlife Trust supported the volunteers in three further days of coppicing.

The volunteers, who contributed over 200 hours of their time, were recruited through poster adverts, Facebook and word of mouth. The initial areas chosen for coppicing in 2016/7 were near the southwest end of Allotment Wood. The work involved clearing the areas of Bramble and scrub, removing embedded litter (including a car wheel and a sofa!), coppicing Hazels and creating dead hedges. In January and February 2017 an area adjacent to The Ditch was coppiced. This area is now known as the Ditch Coupe. In November and December of that year, areas to the southwest edge of the Valley Road Path were also coppiced. All these works allowed a dense ground flora to rapidly develop.

An area coppiced during in February 2017

The same area in March 2019, with a dense re-growth of Ramsons

In early 2018 the MMCG Working Group brought in several different groups of volunteers to continue the woodland management, which included further scrub clearance and coppicing along the Valley Road Path. A small group of volunteers from the Bristol Rehabilitation

Service, working with the Forest of Avon Trust Wellbeing project and MVCG volunteers, made a significant contribution to this work in Allotment Wood over six Fridays, which became known as Forest Fridays. As well as coppicing, the group learnt woodland craft and outdoor cooking skills. The group cleared an area around The Apple and created a clearing nearby, in which a circle of logs, for seating, were installed. This latter area became known as The Classroom. It now offers an area for other Forest of Avon activities and quiet reflection.

The Classroom – a home from home!

Other areas along the southeastern edge of Allotment Wood were coppiced by Forest of Avon volunteers during the winters of 2018/19 and 2019/20 to create the Gate Coupe and Oak Coupe respectively. The increase in the variety and quantity of flora and fauna in these areas has been incredibly rapid and noticeable.

Such was the rapid regrowth of the coppiced Hazel stools in the Ditch Coupe that they were re-coppiced in the spring of 2021 to provide stakes for fruit trees in Manor Woods Orchard. A small number of trees donated from people's gardens were also planted in the Ditch and Gate Coupes in 2021.

Planting donated trees in the Ditch Coupe in spring 2021

Butchers Broom Spinney

Much of the abandoned allotment site, amounting to about 037ha, to the northeast of the Valley Road Path was planted-up with trees, including Wild Cherries, Field Maples, Rowan and a few Scots Pines. This area is now known as Butcher's Broom Spinney, due to the presence of specimens of the plants after which it is named.

Butcher's Broom

Butcher's Broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*) is a curious evergreen shrub. It does not have leaves, but instead has scaly flat shoots known as cladodes that give the appearance of stiff, spine-tipped leaves. Small greenish flowers appear in spring, and are borne singly in the centre of the cladodes. The female flowers are followed by a green berry that ripens to red. The seeds are bird-distributed. It is present throughout Britain. It is however most abundant in woodlands, copses and hedgerows, where it is tolerant of deep shade, in southern England and Wales. Due to its attractive winter/spring color, Butchers Broom is widely planted in gardens, and has spread as a garden escapee in many areas outside its native range. This is no doubt the origins of the plants in the spinney.

Gaps in the tree canopy at the lower, southeastern, end of the spinney were planted-up with mainly shrub/understory species, for example Hazel, Dogwood and Rowan, in the spring of 2021 as part of the Bristol City Council One Tree per Child program.

One Tree per Child planting in Butchers Broom Spinney – February 2021