

A non - historian's view of the history of Barton Lane allotments, Cirencester

Barton Lane Allotments are situated to the west of Cirencester close to the town centre, tucked behind Gloucester Street. They lie alongside the course of Ermin Street, the ancient Roman road from Cirencester to Gloucester, of which Gloucester Street forms the start, just outside the walls of Corinium Dobunorum (Cirencester's Roman name). To the south is Cirencester Park, part of the Bathurst Estate, seat of the 9th Earl of Bathurst. The allotments are well hidden and many residents of Cirencester are unaware of their existence, often pleasantly surprised when they discover them for the first time. Barton Lane Allotments are privately owned by a charitable trust, known as St John's Hospital and Other Alms House Charities.

St John's Hospital in Cirencester was founded by King Henry I in 1133 after completion of Cirencester Abbey, or St Mary's Abbey, Cirencester. The Abbey was quite separate from the town of Cirencester whose inhabitants were often at odds with the Abbot, as both town and Abbey wished to control the Hospital and its property. Eventually the Abbot and convent won their control at the gift of Edward III in 1348. The Chantry, pictured, located in Spitalgate Lane where divine service was performed, was an annexe to the Hospital which consisted of dwellings for poor hospitallers and had an extensive estate for its support. On the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in 1539, the Abbey and Hospital were surrendered to the crown, and the Abbey demolished. By Order in Chancery in 1609, the minister and church wardens of Cirencester were appointed trustees to govern the hospital. They were joined in 1631 by the local authority in the shape of Overseers of the Poor who were elected to care for the poor and give them work. This trusteeship has continued to the present day and has now become St John's Hospital Charitable Trust, the principle activity of which is to provide alms houses for widows, spinsters and couples over the age of 50.

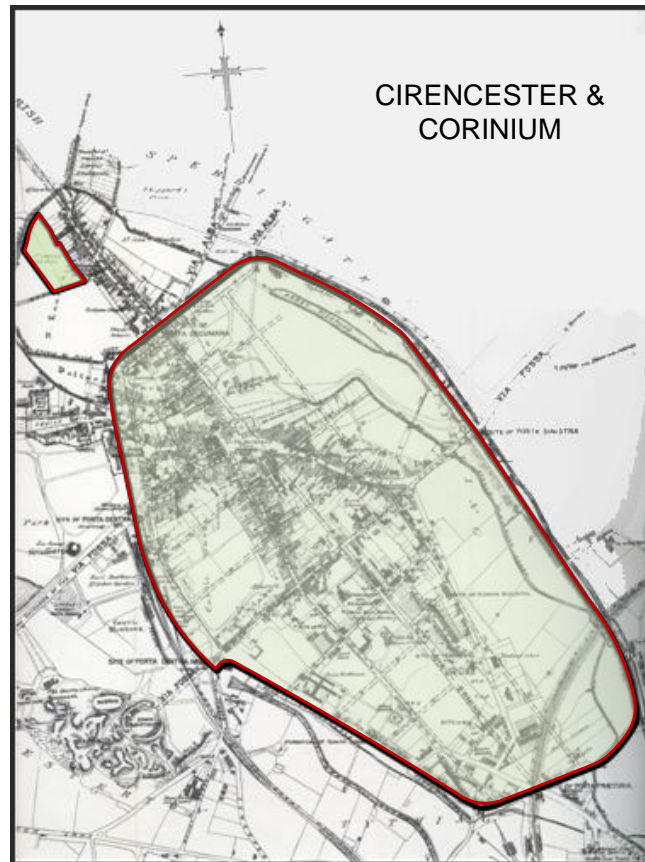


St John's Hospital Chantry, Spitalgate Lane, Cirencester

Prior to the arrival of the Romans, archaeological evidence indicates the presence of Iron Age settlements on the well drained alluvial soil of the river Churn. Recent discoveries reveal the presence of an Iron Age farming settlement on the site of Kingshill School, Cirencester, c100BC and 75AD and another; found 5K north of Cirencester at Bagendon, has also been excavated. Both are thought to be settlements of the Dobunni, a tribe whose territory included modern day Gloucestershire.

It is fairly safe to assume that some form of cultivation has been carried out on the site of Barton Lane Allotments since Roman times and possibly earlier. The presence of easily accessible water from the River Churn, and the close proximity to the town, made the site ideal for growing market produce. The discovery of a Roman coin in the allotments and a garden in Gloucester Street, and the fact that no evidence of buildings on the site has ever been found, certainly suggests activity of a horticultural nature. It is probable that dwellings sprang up alongside Ermin Street during Roman times and more modern structures remain today, with a high proportion of the houses now Victorian in design. Dwellings on part of the south side of Gloucester Street back onto the site of Barton Lane Allotments and it is tempting to suppose that, over the centuries, residents would have taken advantage of land available for growing food or farming.

Leprosy was endemic in England for centuries and it has been recognised in Roman skeletons unearthed in Cirencester. We know of at least one leper colony in Cirencester and a leper hostel was founded at the intersection of Barton Lane and Gloucester Street in 1343 by Edith Biset of Wiggold. It was part of St Lawrence hospital and it is thought that the allotments were once the hostel gardens tended by lepers to provide food for themselves. In fact, Barton Lane allotments were once known as St Lawrence Gardens.



Kennett Beecham section from the map of Cirencester and Corinium showing the line of the Roman wall and the position of St Lawrence Gardens, now Barton Lane Allotments, 1886

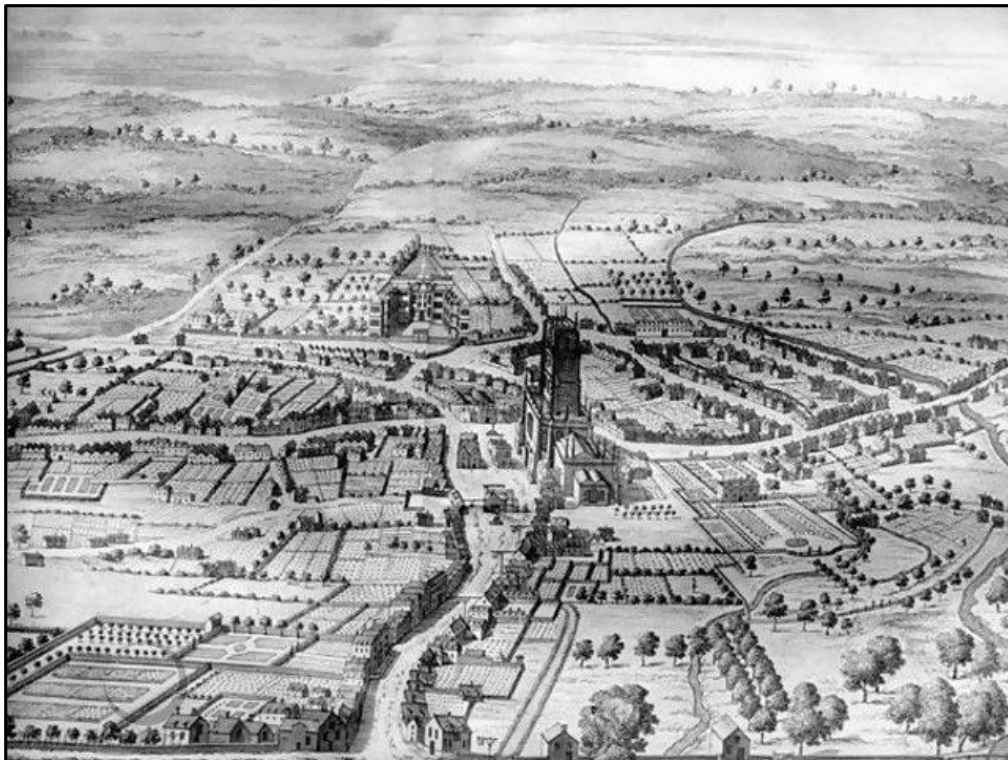
Why would Edith Biset found or endow a leper hospital? By the end of the 12th century the doctrine of purgatory had been decreed: those who had not fully repented on earth could purge their sins after death. The Pope confirmed that God heeded living people's prayers and could be persuaded to reduce an individual's time in purgatory. You could shorten your stay by payment to the church or good deeds. A hospital with lepers praying for you daily was a good investment for your immortal soul.

In return, inmates had an adequate diet, bed-rest if necessary and the prospect of a good send-off. The healthy brethren offered spiritual support and dispensed remedies. Exotic concoctions were supposed to cure leprosy (turtle blood, water in which Christ's feet had been washed, and so on) but the only one normally possible was frequent bathing, preferably in the river Jordan. A curious side-effect of the doctrine of purgatory was a change in lepers' status. From being reviled as sinners, they became a valuable source of prayers, privileged to suffer purgatory on earth. If borne with Christian fortitude, leprosy allowed them to go straight to heaven. A few healthy individuals even sought the disease to guarantee an afterlife with the angels.

It is very likely that the area now occupied by the allotments was in the midst of the Civil War battle for Cirencester. The people of Cirencester supported parliament, but the town's defences were poor, comprising low stone walls and watercourses and were therefore vulnerable to attack. On January 7th, 1643, Prince Rupert, nephew to Charles 1, appeared outside the town with a large army, demanding surrender. It was refused and he departed to return with about 6,000 troops and attacked on February 2nd

at noon. The attack was two-pronged with forces entering the town from the north via Spitalgate and, of more interest to us, from the North West, led by Price Rupert. Barton House, located close to the allotments, stood in their way and was heavily defended by musketeers. Only after it was set on fire were the defenders forced to retreat. The battle for Cirencester was over in four hours but was very fierce. The allotments could well have formed part of the battleground, although no evidence of this has ever been found. The Royalists held Cirencester until 1645 when the civil war was coming to a close.

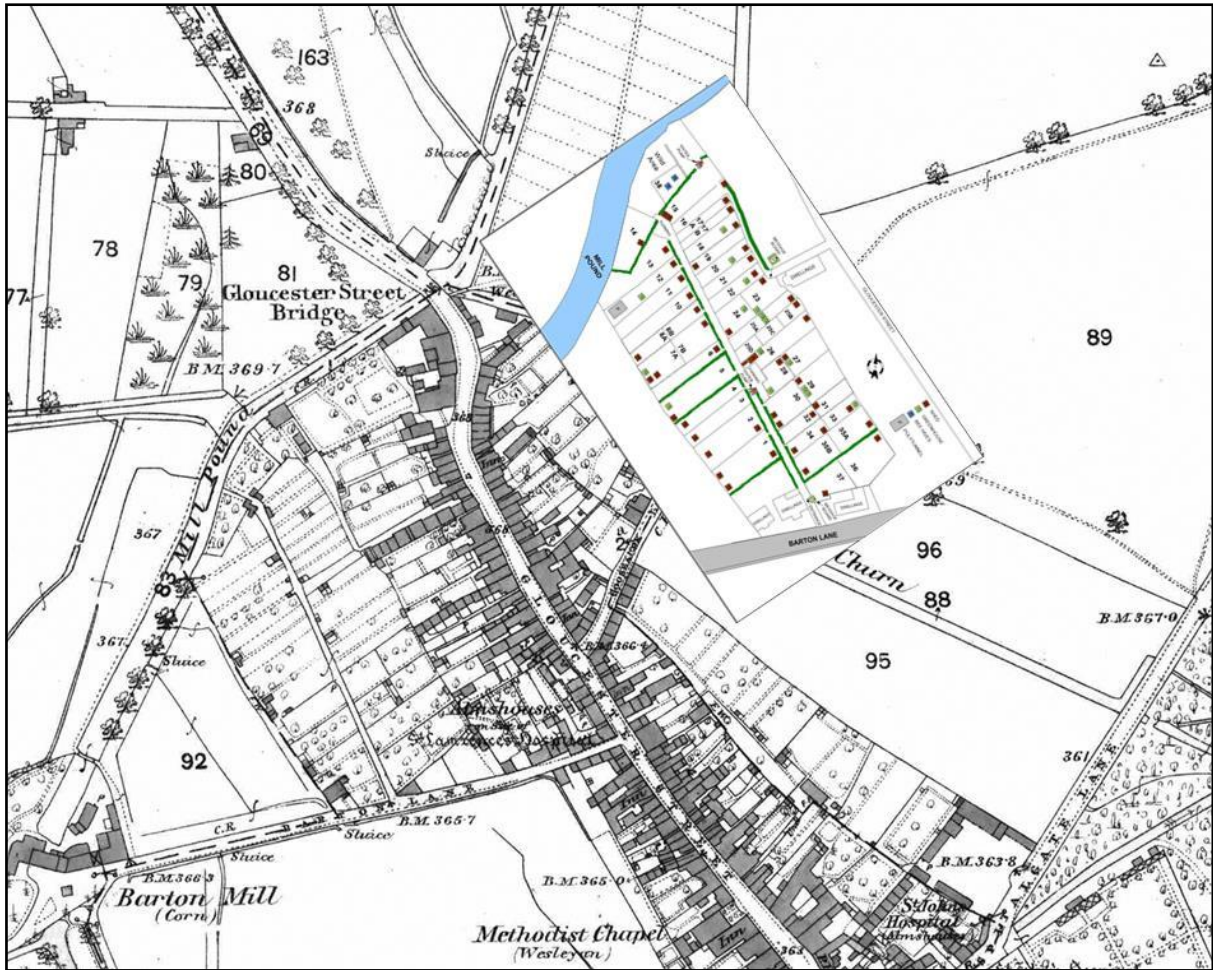
In a bird's-eye view engraving of Cirencester, drawn by Johannes Kip and dated c1712, and a later edition dated 1768, the road to Gloucester is depicted. Although the detail and scale cannot be wholly relied upon, hedge lined fields to the south of the road, behind dwellings, can be clearly seen disappearing North West out of the picture. Their position, roughly where Barton Lane Allotments is now situated, once again suggests that cultivation of this piece of land was being carried out in the eighteenth century and has, almost certainly, continued without let up to today.



Johannes Kip – Bird's eye view of Cirencester, c1712

Many artefacts of interest have been found by plot holders over the years in addition to the Roman coin, including shards of pottery considered to be of Roman origin, old bottles, clay pipe stems and bowls, jewellery, silver cutlery, many blacksmith-made items and most recently, a George III silver shilling (a male labourer's daily wage) dated 1818. Imagine toiling on your plot, then going home to find you'd lost a day's pay!

We have the record of a '*numerous and respectable*' meeting from 1833 held in Cirencester town hall, where adoption of a system of '*allotting portions of land*' to '*permanently to raise the character and better the condition of the labourer*' was enthusiastically discussed. The 1884 Ordnance Survey map of Cirencester clearly shows St Lawrence Gardens, now Barton Lane Allotments, and the layout is remarkably similar to today. Were the allotments originally founded as a result of that earlier meeting?



1884 Ordnance Survey map showing St Lawrence Gardens overlaid with the current map of Barton Lane Allotments.

Cirencester town and Barton Lane Allotments, both steeped in history, are well worth a visit. All are welcome.