



# THE GARDENS OF THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS

## MARGARET WILLES

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'This is a wonderful book, and an unusual addition to the gardening shelf. It reveals the democracy of gardening and its being both a craft and an art – a mixture of hard labour and passion...Willes's history is a constant statement of how green fingers have transformed lives. The book is a delight.'

—Ronald Blythe, author of *Akenfield*

This beautifully illustrated volume is the first book to bring to the foreground the history of working class gardening in Britain. Margaret Willes's research unearths a rich and vibrant people's history, bringing into the limelight stories of ingenious cultivation by the workforces. Spanning more than four centuries, she explores the stories of those who had neither the time nor the space to cultivate their own plots and whose gardens were for sustenance (and out of desperation) perhaps, but not for pleasure. Yet this remarkable book reveals that since the earliest records of what we could call a 'working class' in Britain, through the grim privations of the Industrial Revolution, to today's council estate- and highrise-bound communities, those for whom it was almost impossible to cultivate and cherish their own gardens, have.

This moving and illuminating story is packed with stories of unknown individuals gardening ingeniously and deviously; of the great philanthropic industrialists who provided gardens for their workforces; of the fashionable rich pilfering the gardening ideas of the poor; of pub syndicates and rival vegetable growers; of flower-fanciers cultivating exotic blooms on their windowsills; and of today's allotment-grab by the middle classes and the use of gardening in rehabilitating young offenders. Not forgetting the garden gnomes and pigeon coops.

Margaret Willes paints this broad canvas with light as well as shadow: though some people did find a way against the odds, and fewer achieved truly extraordinary things, the vast majority were not so fortunate. This book provides a fresh and absorbing way into British working-class life across four centuries.



**Margaret Willes** is an enthusiastic gardener and the former publisher at the National Trust. Her previous books include *The Making of the English Gardener: Plants, Books and Inspiration, 1560–1660*

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All publicity enquiries to Lauren Atherton or Heather Nathan:

E: [lauren.atherton@yaleup.co.uk](mailto:lauren.atherton@yaleup.co.uk)/[heather.nathan@yaleup.co.uk](mailto:heather.nathan@yaleup.co.uk); T: 020 7070 4900