

MANEA FEN: AN EXPERIMENT IN AGRARIAN COMMUNITARIANISM, 1838-1841

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I

There has been some writing, and much preaching, and the world requires much more of both, to create a powerful influential public opinion in favour of united exertions, and means of enjoyment of health and happiness; but one successful and well conducted agricultural experiment would be more serviceable than either.¹

SO E. T. Craig wrote to *The New Moral World* from Wisbech on 14 August 1838, describing the intended communitarian experiment of William Hodson of Brimstone-Hill, Upwell. Craig spoke from experience to the numerous readers of Robert Owen's *The New Moral World* for he had previously acted as secretary to the communitarian experiment carried out at Ralahine in Ireland.² He described Hodson's estate as follows:

The farm is in the form of a square, at one end of which runs the Bedford River, near which it is intended to erect a number of houses, to form one side of a square, together with an engine for grinding corn &c, a steam apparatus for cooking, heating the dwellings, dormitories &c. I saw about 600 bricks ready for baking which had been made on the spot. . . .

Recommending Hodson as "one of the most practical and scientific farmers in this part of the country" he went on to say that Hodson intended building houses for the reception of the first members, leaving the infant school and other necessary buildings to be erected by the members themselves.

William Hodson followed this up by appealing to readers of *The New Moral World*:

You can never be truly happy whilst you are obliged to touch your hat brinks and call those your superiors who live upon your labours, and take all the advantages they can in keeping you in fear and subjection.

¹ *The New Moral World*, 25 August 1838.

² The Ralahine community flourished between the years 1831-3 and was dispersed because Vandaleur, the owner of the estate, gambled it away in Dublin and his successor in ownership evicted the communionists. See *The Irish Land and Labour Question, illustrated in the history of Ralahine and Co-operative Farming*

and declaring that the united Advancement Societies at Wisbech were behind him. He claimed that his experiment in communitarianism was an answer to contemporary problems :

It is a well known fact that the present distinctions in society are the cause of more envy and strife than anything which has ever been produced in the world. In order to avoid this calamity, there will be no distinction—no individual property, the motto will be “Each for all”.

In this community food would be cooked by a special scientific apparatus, there would be a common dining room, a large school-room, and “machinery which has hitherto been for the benefit of the rich, will be adapted in the colony for lessening labour”. A steam engine would be erected for thrashing and grinding corn as well as for many other purposes. Land would be let at a moderate rent, and before anyone could be dispossessed, a common vote (in which women would participate) would be taken. The houses for the communitarians were to be erected as quickly as possible :

no time will be lost in erecting fifty houses . . . so that fifty families may form a community. These houses will be constructed with flues so as to heat them to any required temperature, thus avoiding the labour of making fifty fires, to consume an immense fuel besides dirtying the room you live in and also removing the possibility of your children being burnt to death.

Both *The New Moral World* and E. T. Craig cautioned readers not to expect too much, the former quoting the Town Clerk of Ephesus (“Let us do nothing rashly”)¹ and the latter prophesying “failure and disappointment” if a community was formed with “the raw materials and men which Mr. Hodson has at command at present”.² But their cautionary words were

(Manchester, 1882); E. T. Craig, *An Irish Commune. The history of Ralahine* (Dublin, 1920); William Pare, *Co-operative Agriculture: A solution of the Land Question as exemplified in the history of the Ralahine Co-operative Agricultural Association, County Clare, Ireland* (London, 1870); G. J. Holyoake, *A History of Co-operation*, i. (London, 1906), 178-81; G. D. H. Cole, *A Century of Co-operation* (Manchester, 1944), pp. 22-3, 34, 341. ¹ 25 August 1838.

² *The New Moral World*, 15 September 1838. It is interesting that the National Community Friendly Society, formed by the orthodox Owenites in 1837, looked for an estate in Norfolk and actually contracted to buy the Wretton estate, near Wisbech, of James Hill, who, however, demanded the right to carry it out (Holyoake, op. cit. p. 188). For Hill's interest in social reform (his second wife was the daughter of Dr. Southwood Smith) see C. E. Maurice, *Life of Octavia Hill* (London, 1913), pp. 5-6.

counterbalanced by a surge of enthusiasm that swelled up in the Owenite branches. Thus Branch 16 in London held a public meeting “to consider the best means of promoting the success of this important experiment”.¹ This enthusiasm was further whetted by the Secretary of the Cambridgeshire Community, S. Rowbotham, who in the course of a public address said :

Many of you, no doubt, have concluded from the accounts which have some time since appeared in the *Star in the East* and *The New Moral World*, that the situation is unfit for the purpose and the attempt must end in failure. Such were my opinions. But I can now assure you, from personal inspection and residence upon the spot for nearly a fortnight, that the place is in every respect well calculated for a community, and that with the preparations already made, the devotedness and practical knowledge of Mr. Hodson and your concurrence and assistance, we will succeed.²

As Rowbotham outlined it, the scheme seemed simple. Hodson's estate, which was $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles long and $\frac{1}{4}$ mile wide, would maintain fifty or sixty people until the community was established, and it would, through trustees, be able to own the estate in twenty years. The community building, Rowbotham went on, would be finished in a week and the wheat, pigs, and cows offered adequate guarantees of the necessities of life. Moreover, the Bedford River, which ran close by the estate, “would form a beautiful promenade in the summer evening”. The prospect of acquiring another 500 acres in a few years would spur the colonists on to make the community a perfect square. The whole project, Rowbotham concluded, “would teach a lesson to our radical friends”.

Shining as these portents might seem, the orthodox Owenites were anxious to point out the differences between Hodson's projected community and one of which they would approve. Thus G. A. Fleming, secretary of the National Community Friendly Society, said in *The New Moral World* on 12 January 1839: “It is all under the entire controul (*sic*) of Mr. Hodson and has no further connection with the body of the Socialists than they individually may think it proper to form.” Owen, too, gave his opinion that the minimum strength on which a

¹ Op. cit. 22 September 1838.

² Op. cit. 12 January 1839. *The Star of the East*, published at Wisbech, was edited by James Hill.

community could be based was 500, but at the same time expressed his "cordial sympathy" for the project. "It may become a useful auxiliary to more important and conclusive experiments upon a new principle of society", concluded *The New Moral World*.

Such doubts as were raised were dissipated, however, by the most favourable report of A. Hutchinson, who had been delegated by the Salford Owenites to inquire into the condition of the Hodsonian experiment. Hutchinson spent three days there and confessed that though he had expected to see "a vast extent of black, moorish looking waste where the eye would be spent as if looking on the ocean", he was agreeably mistaken. Instead he saw lots of fertile land, forty acres of wheat, peat for burning and larks, snipe and wild duck in abundance. He confessed himself convinced by the "clear, concise and business-like nature of Mr. Hodson's arrangements".

The Salford group, hearing Hutchinson's favourable report, resolved "to the utmost of their power, to give encouragement by purchasing the various articles they (the colonists) might manufacture or produce", and requested the land committee of the National Community Friendly Society (of which Fleming was the secretary) "to take into their serious consideration the eligibility of the 700 acres adjoining Mr. Hodson's land, for forming a community". Both these resolutions were laid before the central board of the Owenites.

Rowbotham, as secretary of the Hodsonian experiment, was present at this meeting in Salford, as he had also been at another at Birmingham and as he was also to be at Rochdale in which place he delivered a lecture on 21 January 1839. Rochdale, needless to say, followed Salford in passing similar resolutions.

The harmony, so laboriously established between the Hodsonians and the Owenites, did not last long. A stormy meeting took place at the Salford Institution on 16 April 1839, at which they disclaimed all connection with Mr. Hodson and his proceedings. The cause was not far to seek. Charles Crawford, of Garnet Street, Stockport had been one of those who had gone to Manea Fen in the Christmas of 1838 and had returned, beggared, on 1 April 1839. "I am without home and without

bread", he complained, "as the tools by which I earned my bread have not reached their destination."¹ He claimed that in his three months in the community he had received no wages.

But others of the colonists did not agree. Thus E. Wastney came out strongly with a condemnation of the first colonists who were not prepared to make the best of things.

They commenced finding fault with one another and with everything about them. At the time of our arrival the first general split had taken place, there had been a fall spent on nothing but useless discussions; previous to this split there were no less than 7 females and 4 males constantly engaged to manage the household department which at that time consisted of about 30 persons. . . . All they (the first colonists) did was look to the provisions, this I assure you was done in the most disgusting manner possible . . . they paid much more attention to the beer shops and the company of the lowest prostitutes that were to be found in the district.

Wastney painted a Hogarthian picture of the drunken riots—lasting the whole night—and concluded, "a worse selection of persons for carrying out any great object of this description than the parties who have left this establishment it would be impossible to make".²

II

In view of the jaundiced view of their condition presented by the orthodox Owenite journals, the Manea Fen communitarians decided to establish one of their own "to defend the Community, report its proceedings, and form a medium of communications between the society and the people". This was *The Working Bee*, a weekly "intended to be devoted to the best interests of the Industrious Classes". As the announcement ran:

The Working Bee will be commenced by a Society of Working Men, associated to carry into Effect Practical Communities of Equality of Duties, Rights, and Means of Enjoyment, the Establishment of which will give Universal Suffrage, and the whole Produce of their Labour, to all who are now robbed of their Political and Social Privileges.

"He who will not work neither shall he eat" ran the sub-title, and the publishers (the Trustees of the Hodsonian Community Society) delegated the editorship and printing to John Green, a

¹ *The New Moral World*, 4 May 1839; see also Crawford's letter in the same paper on 8 June 1839.

² *The Working Bee*, 3 August 1839.

former Owenite lecturer in Liverpool,¹ who brought out the first number on 20 July 1839.

This marked, in more senses than one, a new phase in the history of the community. For it marked the dropping of Samuel Rowbotham, who, *The Working Bee* announced, "is neither secretary to, nor a member of, this society". This was obviously because of the riff-raff he had netted on his evangelistic tour of the north of England. It also marked the emergence of the community as a revolutionary cell, since the editorial renounced "the old world" as "false, hollow and rotten . . . in error alike in its religion, its morals, economies and politics". The dawn of a new world was proclaimed, and the community lined itself up behind the tradition of Confucius, Plato, More, Bacon, Harrington, Bellers, Godwin, and Holcroft as a witness to the eternal truth that "man's feelings and convictions are formed for him, his actions flow from the operation of external circumstances". Above all, they claimed to be "Communionists" (the word was their own):

All amongst us is ours. No mine or their is here in our community but universal commonalty of interest is felt and expressed throughout our establishment. . . . Amongst us are no drunkards, no swearers, no prostitutes, no tradesmen and no thieves. We have no such places as St. Giles, London; Angel Street, Manchester; or Lace Street, Liverpool; contrasting their filth and ignorance, with the princely mansions, and sons and daughters of fashionable life.

So assured were the trustees of the community that they announced their intention to refuse admittance to anyone unless they had first served as hired individuals. Referring to their "file of applications" they declared themselves aware of the "heart cries" of those who were prejudicing their jobs in "the old world" by propagating the truths of communitarianism. The conveyance of the estate to the trustees was announced on 27 July by Hodson himself, in an article which did much to alleviate the suspicions aroused by the adverse experiences of

¹ He was the author of *The Emigrants* (Manchester, 1838) and *Casper Hauser or the Power of External Circumstances exhibited in forming Human Character* (Manchester, 1840). Holyoake, who does not mention his interest in Manea Fen, recalled (op. cit. i. 237) that "he was a useful lecturer. . . . He afterwards went to America, where, before he had acquired the faculty of seeing two ways at once, necessary in that land, he was cut into halves by a railway train. He held some official position on the line."

Charles Crawford of Stockport. He declared that it was a year since he had first become an Owenite, and that it was only after he had "travelled over the greater part of England" looking for a suitable site that he decided to offer his own estate of 200 acres "to facilitate an incipient practical community". It was the opposition he met, Hodson went on, which forced him to "relieve such as would come":

Most of them penniless in pocket and bankrupt of moral qualifications; incurring me great sums in their expenses and causing much unpleasant feelings by the vulgarity of their manners and immorality of proceedings. To carry out our object with such discordants would have been the acme of absurdity. I therefore saw it advisable that these parties should return to their former state of society, until arrangements are made by which we can more effectually operate upon them. That such parties should, when they returned to their old associations, make out the best tale they could is not to be wondered at, nor need you be surprised that their relations, absurd as they are, should be listened to with the greatest avidity by our opponents.¹

He confessed he had suffered "much pecuniary loss by sending the parties alluded to to their homes".

Since Hodson had staked his entire fortune on the experiment, it is at this point worth considering what sort of man he was. He was thirty-one years old, and had spent six years afloat. "Six years of maritime life combined with vivacity of temperament, preclude the sobriety of the saint or the formality of an anchorite", he warned the colonists "and if at any time, Gentlemen, you observe too great a levity in my proceedings, I shall esteem it a favour to be corrected by you". He had also been a Methodist lay-preacher, but ran into trouble with that sect because he married his deceased wife's sister—a heinous crime as the law then stood.²

The trustees at first numbered four—the John Green whom we have already met as editor of *The Working Bee*; Edmund Wastney, whom we have met defending the community against the attacks of Charles Crawford; Thomas Doughty and William Cutting. They evidently worked with a will throughout the early summer months for, with Doughty as architect, four houses

¹ *The Working Bee*, 27 July 1839.

² *Ibid.* and 15th February 1840. He very probably heard Owen speak on 11, 12, and 13 July 1838, when Owen was staying with James Hill of Wisbech (Holyoake, *op. cit.* i. 63).

were started, twelve others were rising, and a railway, some 200-300 yards long, connected them to the brick kilns. Other buildings finished were the kitchen (with larder, wash-house and oven), the dormitory (for hired labourers) a library, a dormitory, a dining room for fifty people and a dormitory for six married people. There was a compositors room (9 ft. × 9 ft.) for the press, a barn for the joiners and a six-roomed cottage. The clay pit (40 ft. × 12 ft.), now some 22 feet deep, had yielded clay for 100,000 bricks, for which the kiln had been built, and was drained by an "Archimedean screw". But perhaps the most singular feature of all was an observatory on the top of which floated a tricolour with the Union Jack—indicative of conquered tyranny—"covering below it". This had two platforms—one housing forty people for tea, and the other sixteen.

They announced their intention of building a further set of some seventy-two cottages to form a square, the fourth side of which was to be open to the banks of the River Bedford. This was to be the first of a series of from six to eight squares "as circumstances may determine, in which we shall be enabled to classify our members according to time of membership, congeniality of mind, knowledge of our principles, and amiability . . . preparatory to the erection of a final community". Less remote was the intention to build a windmill of eight horse power to drain the clay-pit, without which such plans would never mature.¹

The achievement of the trustees was tangible. Thirty-five acres of wheat, twenty-seven of oats, twenty-four of grass, a hundred of fallow, with fifty acres ploughed in the preceding week was no small achievement. And, as a sign that things of the mind had not been forgotten, a schoolmaster from Hill's² infant school at Wisbech, one Craig, had been established in the library with his class. Nor were the lighter sides of life forgotten: a gymnasium was in use and a cricket ground had been laid.³ But perhaps the most surprising venture under active

¹ *The Working Bee*, 3 August 1839.

² For Hill see above, p. 289 n. 2.

³ *The Working Bee*, 10 August 1839.

consideration was a laboratory. Well might one correspondent tell a friend in far-away Penzance, "My dear fellow, in seven years from this, Manea Fen will present the appearance of Paradise".¹

To the conservative Fen farmers, however, Manea Fen was the very reverse. *The Cambridge Advertiser* carried a letter in early August from one of them trusting that it "may have the effect of inducing pious and well-disposed persons to take IMMEDIATE steps to counteract the sting of *The Working Bee*. If this is not done, I fear we shall, before long, find that the fearful scenes of 1816 will be again enacted in this place and neighbourhood; for when once the religious principles of the people are undermined, what security is there for life or property. . . . It is clear the editor and his correspondents ridicule the idea of future rewards and punishments, and entertain very lax notions of morals and the intercourse of the sexes."² Another local, but more vocal, critic was the Christian Advocate to the University of Cambridge, the Rev. G. Pearson, who expressed his horror both at the ruling doctrine at Manea Fen—that man was not responsible for his actions—and at the concubinage which he professed to find there :

It is impossible to say how much mischief such a body of men may not be capable of doing amongst the more ignorant and depraved part of the native population, by personal exertions, secretly and cautiously employed, and by the distribution of cheap publications of an infidel and revolutionary character.

He went on :

I am informed, on good authority, that the colony at Manea Fen is very assiduous both in preaching and in dispensing small tracts, in the propagation of their infidel and revolutionary doctrines, and that, after the harvest, they purpose to undertake a lecturing tour, for the purpose of making their opinions more extensively known.

Calling on the clergy to be on their guard, he continued :

As the existence of these infidels in this country may not be generally known, much less their contemplated scheme of making proselytes amongst the rural population, I trust that the clergy and religious persons of every description, will excuse the liberty which I have taken of drawing their attention to the subject . . . and be on their guard against the extension of these emissaries of infidelity among the country parishes, and may take measures to avert these flagitious and wicked attempts.³

¹ *The Working Bee*, 10 August 1839.

² *Ibid.* 14 August 1839.

³ *Ibid.* 28 September 1839.

If nothing else, these two attacks showed that the communion-ists were, by now, sufficient of a challenge to the established order in Cambridge to merit attention. And that challenge looked like being strengthened by the election of a Board of Directors at Manea on 4 November 1839. Hodson himself was elected President (for five years) and agricultural director and was given six colleagues : Green (of the press), Joseph Davidge (of stores), William Cutting (of the smiths), Thomas Doughty (of the bricklayers), whilst Edmund Wastney was appointed secretary (*pro. tem.*).¹

III

But the internal, personal conflicts were visible too, for on 12 November the Directors met to hear a complaint by Doughty that he had received "brutal and disgraceful treatment" from Green. The conflict was evidently one between the two most intelligent members of the community, for Doughty was the architectural director and Green had been the very efficient editor of *The Working Bee*.

A public meeting was called in the evening of the same day and Green offered to leave in twenty-four hours. He was given £2 to go away. In three days W. H. Bellatti was chosen to succeed Green as editor and S. Collinson to act as Director of the Printing Establishment. Green had evidently annoyed both Hodson and Doughty, for the announcement of his departure read, "Through the professions of Mr. Green the Director was induced, before the society was legally formed, to buy printing machinery" and described him as "issuing from his office, using the most violent language towards an unoffending fellow-creature, accompanied by threats, which, in the old state of society, would have subjected him to the laws of his country".² Green's departure was unfortunate, and he regretted it, since he left his wife and child behind. He voiced it in a poem *I left in Grief*, one verse of which ran :

Adieu dear Fen, in thee are hearts,
From which I ne'er would wish to sever.
Whose love, too deep to be effaced,
Is stamped *within my heart for ever.*³

¹ *The Working Bee*, 16 November 1839.

² *Ibid.* 23 November 1839.

³ *Ibid.* 7 December 1839.

As secretary, Wastney set about recruiting other personnel. An advertisement appeared above his signature in *The Working Bee* of 23 November 1839, asking for candidates specifying that "they must be first-rate workmen, and well acquainted with the principles of socialism, and of the following trades, viz. one Wheelwright, one Cabinet Maker, one Printer, two Joiners and one Gardener." They got a number of replies¹ and were able to select accordingly.

Another new departure was the inauguration of a scientific column in *The Working Bee*, probably due to the new Director of the Printing Establishment, Samuel Collinson, of Rochdale. He had joined the community five months earlier, in June, having left Rochdale the previous March. He was also probably responsible for the recruitment of two more Rochdale men by the community: Cropper and Heywood. Certainly the defections from that quarter seemed to annoy Fleming who attempted to dissuade them from going.²

Indeed, the Owenites were now quite anxious to check the progress of Manea Fen, since they were busy establishing their own community at Tytherly. One of the most vocal and powerful of Owen's supporters was Isaac Ironside, who had been mainly responsible for building the first Hall of Science in the country at Sheffield.³ Ironside now came down in person to visit Manea Fen, and when he left he took the community's builder with him. The community was furious:

This gentleman (i.e. Ironside), decoyed our builder . . . he sent a letter to the director of the brick-making establishment informing him that he is chosen to go to Tytherly and must leave us forthwith and repair to Sheffield to receive instructions prior to going there . . . were we actuated by the method pursued by inhabitants of the old world, of dealing with offenders according to their deserts, we should give Mr. Ironside a very different reception if he ever honoured us with any more of his "social visits". It is the conduct of such men as Mr. Ironside that does so much injury to the great cause in which we ought to be engaged rather in assisting than injuring each other.⁴

Little injury, however, seems to have been done to the community for the close of the year saw a most encouraging progress

¹ *The Working Bee*, 3 November, 1839.

² *Ibid.* 7 November 1839.

³ Isaac Ironside, 1808-70, was Owen's most active supporter in Sheffield and became one of the promoters of the Tytherly establishment.

⁴ *The Working Bee*, 30 November 1839.

report. The windmill was finished on the very day in which the communionists received the Enrolled rules from the revising barrister, so in honour of the Registrar of Friendly Societies, it was ceremonially named Tidd Pratt.¹ This gave the community a source of power: water could be now pumped out of the clay-pit; a circular saw of 36-inch diameter could be worked; a lathe and grindstone could be turned: and, perhaps the greatest refinement of all, circular brushes for cleaning boots and shoes, or knives and forks, could be operated.² As the news of the Tytherly community came in through the columns of *The New Moral World*, the Manea Fen community could proudly boast:

our houses are now rapidly approaching completion and we hope in a short time to see every member and candidate comfortably lodged. Our school will be finished in a few days and we have formed ordinances for its government.³

A thousand fruit trees were purchased, and the members agreed to work from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Financially, the situation was equally encouraging. The communionists had already repaid William Hodson £600 of the money he had loaned them and at that rate they looked like owning their 200 acres of land free of debt in three years. Hodson himself acknowledged that "The community has now ceased to be dependent on me". It was governed by regulations which could not be altered except "by the consent of the members". "I would impress upon all parties", he told them, "that I can have but little influence over the society I have had the pleasure of forming." With Wastney as secretary and the stalwarts Cutting, Davidge, Doughty, G. Dunn, and D. Jones as trustees, it looked as if it was prospering exceedingly. The time was obviously propitious for the community to fan out and establish branches, and this they proceeded to do.

¹ Tidd Pratt, 1797-1870, who was counsel to certify the rules of savings banks and friendly societies from 1834-46. His vigilance on behalf of the public was known and he would disclose, as far as official restraints allowed, the unsound condition of any benefit or friendly society which he found.

² Probably a shaft, attached to the steam engine, drove them.

³ *The Working Bee*, 14 December 1839.

IV

The expansionist policy of the community was undertaken on the most practical lines. "We are anxious to extend the benefits we have received", wrote the editor of *The Working Bee*, "to all who feel desirous of co-operating with us in the noble and benevolent cause in which we have engaged." Branches were to be "chartered" in each town where there were more than ten sympathisers. These branches were "to disseminate as extensively as possible the principles of co-operation, by circulating *The Working Bee* and such publications as may, from time to time, emanate from this society, and to establish *Depots* for the sale of such articles as may be manufactured for sale by members of this Establishment. From these Branches, we shall, in future, select individuals as members to fill up vacancies, extend our operation, and augment our numbers."¹

Hodson followed up this manifesto by a lecture tour of the Midland Counties. On Boxing Day, 1839, he spoke at Leicester, with some effect, at the festival of their Institution, securing six recruits who joined Manea Fen in the following February.² On 27 December he spoke at Nottingham "in a chapel", and reported :

I saw here an invention for weaving stockings by power made by a Mr. Barton,³ formerly of A.1 Branch, London. This gentleman must not be long out of community, he must either be with us or at Tytherly. The Rational Religionists would do well to secure his services.⁴

From Nottingham he travelled to Lincoln, where he spoke at the Guildhall on 28 December to an audience which included "Lawyers, Clergymen and Physicians" who "appeared paralysed with the novel views" they heard. Here he was sharply questioned by a local Methodist minister, the Rev. Mr. Roebuck who, said Hodson, "wished to draw me out upon

¹ *The Working Bee*, 28 December 1839.

² These consisted of Slingsby (a joiner) and his wife and child; Baker (a wheelwright) and his wife; and Green (a bricklayer and plasterer). These brought the strength of the community up to forty-two.

³ For whom see W. H. G. Armytage, *A. J. Mundella, 1825-1897: The Liberal Background of the Labour Movement* (London, 1951), p. 22.

⁴ *The Working Bee*, 4 January 1840.

Religion, but could not, for my object was to teach the people how to live happily, his to teach them how to die. My replies to him on the Marriage question seemed to give satisfaction." Here Hodson "engaged a gentleman who for many years was connected with a provincial paper" as well as Charles Bates, an ironmonger.¹

This missionary journey certainly attracted attention. Perhaps one of its more interesting by-products was to stimulate the formation of yet another community—this time at Pant-Glas in Merionethshire, by John Moncas and a Liverpool body who described themselves as "The Community of United Friends". It also experienced the discouraging comment of *The New Moral World*. But Moncas showed where his real inspiration lay by sending reports of his communitarian experiment to *The Working Bee*, and looking to Manea Fen as his model.² Even more interesting was its aggravation of John Brindley,³ formerly a master at the National School of March, Cambridgeshire, who emerged at this time as a formidable peripatetic anti-socialist lecturer and seems to have taken a particular dislike to the Manea Fen community. The Bishop of Exeter, the notable Dr. Phillpotts,⁴ was also most vocal in the House of Lords at this time.

On Hodson's return the Directors began to envisage a community of 700 people.⁵ Certainly the number of people who came to look round the colony became so large that they had regretfully to announce that they could no longer serve refreshments without payment. Among these visitors was G. A. Fleming himself, who visited them on behalf of the orthodox Owenites. The secretary of the community was by now W. P. Throsby. D. Jones had retired from the directorate and had

¹ His speech was well reported in the *Lincoln Gazette*, 30 December 1839, but the *Lincolnshire Chronicle* of the same date described it as a "blasphemous effusion" and Hodson as "a minion of mischief".

² It was reported in *The Working Bee* of 3 February 1840 and other accounts appeared 24 April, 8, 15 August, and 9 September.

³ John Brindley's past activities were constantly exposed in *The Working Bee*.

⁴ G. C. B. Davies, *Henry Phillpotts, Bishop of Exeter, 1778-1869* (London, 1954).

⁵ *The Working Bee*, 29 February 1840. On 28 March that year they actually numbered fifty-two.

been replaced by Slingsby, a joiner, one of the recruits obtained at Leicester during Hodson's missionary tour. *The Working Bee* was to be transformed into "an effective organ for the dissemination of social principles and a source of profit to the community". From this time onwards they began to share copy with the *New Moral World*.

The goodwill of the Universal Community Society of Rational Religionists, as the main body of the Owenites, now seemed fairly assured. For, in an article entitled "A look around us" in *The New Moral World*, the author wrote of the Manea Fen colonists :

Their establishment has been in existence upwards of 12 months ; it has, however, made comparatively speaking, but a small progress owing to the unfavourable circumstances under which it was commenced, and which, during a considerable portion of the first year, continued to attend its management. None regretted these drawbacks more than we did nor would have more gladly assisted in their removal ; but a misapprehension at the commencement prevented both parties from understanding each other ; and we were, therefore, content to leave its rectification to Dr. Time, who, as a correspondent wittily remarks, "is a physician who gives most successful prescriptions in cases of disagreement". The obstructions to the progress and good management of Manea Fen have, we understand, now been removed, and the greater portion of these difficulties incident to all new undertakings surmounted.

He quoted from *The Working Bee* of 29 February 1840 :

As the conveniences of our community are of such a nature as to increase our members considerably, we shall feel a pleasure to correspond with anyone who can shew to the Directors that their trade or occupation would be an advantage to the community. The past year has been devoted to the building of suitable dwellings and other conveniences : this being done, it will be our wish to make advantageous additions to our numbers, as we have had an offer of 260 acres more rich land, from Mr. Hodson. We calculate that this, in addition to what we have, will support 700 individuals, and it will be our aim to admit this number as speedily as possible. . . . We possess the fullest confidence in the integrity and high moral qualities of the excellent Secretary to whose management we are inclined to attribute much of the latter prosperity of the Community. . . . A wide stretch of country lies between Tytherly and Manea : it must be the object of both colonies to unite them by a chain of happy community ; and however much we may now smile at the idea of doing so, let us recollect, that not many years since, several miles intervened between some of the Shaker establishments in America, which are now separated by two or three fields. A close cordial union among the friends of socialism, and mutual assistance, will effect wonders.¹

¹ *The New Moral World*, 14 March 1840.

Fleming described his own visit in a later number of *The New Moral World*.

The building and agricultural operations are proceeding with great vigour and determination ; the winter sown crops are looking well, though there is as yet that unfinished appearance about the place which may be expected from large works in the process of execution ; it is evident that the colonists possess a command over very substantial advantages and their steady well-directed efforts will speedily effect all that can be desired. Another harvest will place the success of the establishment beyond doubt, and afford an example to capitalists which we earnestly hope many of them will follow.¹

The healing of the breach with Fleming and the Owenites was symbolized by the appearance of Hodson at the Co-operative Congress in May 1840, where he appealed for a committee of enquiry into his community. Explaining that the average population of Manea Fen over the past year had not been below twenty, that they had built twenty-four houses and some workshops, he urged that the Rational Society should join forces with Manea Fen : Tytherly becoming an educational, and Manea Fen an agricultural community. His proposition was discussed but the old guard of the Rational Society refused to co-operate. Yet Hodson was not downcast. On the contrary, on Whit Tuesday he was to be found at Highbury Barn at a grand tea and ball in honour of Owen.

A completely new *The Working Bee* was issued on 6 June 1840 with the motto "United to support ; but not combined to injure". It contained information of the Board's plan to erect a "Machine Establishment" at Manea Fen for the manufacture of thrashers and drills. They informed their supporters that they had been offered a cast iron moulder, blow furnace, a steam engine and "every other requisite for carrying on a foundry". To enable this to be operated they appealed for the help of first-rate mechanics and when these were forthcoming, they would commence the building required. They also appealed for two bricklayers and individuals from the Staffordshire potteries who could make chimney pots, flower pots, and other refractory products. In the same issue they begged to inform the public that building bricks, flooring tiles, drain pipes and pantiles

¹ *The New Moral World*, 28 March 1840.

could be furnished to customers, and delivered by the boats of the community. Also, singularly enough, they offered “good worsted and other stockings”.¹

These boats were multi-service craft, for earlier, on 9 May, colonists had been reported as sailing up the Bedford River to Walney, “enlivening the way with stirring songs”, in a six-oared cutter. This they repeated in June, attending a Ranters Meeting where they quite stole the show. For as *The Working Bee* proudly confessed everyone turned to look at “the colonists”. “A great improvement is manifested in the manners of the people towards us”, it continued, “we receive no insult from them now, or nothing worth calling such.”² Their sailing boat was aptly named *The Morning Star*.

The growth of the community was reflected in three important ways: money and dress and leisure. Money was abandoned in the community—labour notes being issued for work done and cashed at the store. “This plan saves us the trouble of getting cash . . . money is merely the representation of wealth”, Hodson told the Co-operative Congress.³ Dress also became distinctive, and at a special meeting of the Community on 2 June it was decided to adopt a uniform: tunic, trousers, and straw hats (with caps in the winter time) for the men; dresses for females.⁴ The leisured activities of the community were severely practical. Chemistry classes had been established in the previous winter, and these continued, varied by excursions up the river.⁵

Visitors continued to be attracted in such numbers that a “conductor” was appointed. One of the curious was the former Agricultural superintendent of the Tytherly community—Heaton Aldam, who the month before had resigned his post there. It was, perhaps, the euphoria generated by such continued expatiation on the merits of Manea Fen that led the Directors, in announcing their intention to build three lime

¹ They also announced the accession of Hodges (a knitter), his wife and four children and Ward (also a knitter), together with his wife and two children: all from Leicester.

² *The Working Bee*, 13 June 1840.

⁴ *Ibid.* 13 June 1840.

³ *Ibid.* 30 May 1840.

⁵ *Ibid.* 4 April 1840.

kilns, to say " These additions to our premises will soon give us all the appearance of a town ". Certainly they seemed to be forging ahead : a school was flourishing, and on 27 June they were able to announce " the first birth in the community "—a daughter to William Hodson.¹ And to the visitors must be added the invitations sent by Bradford, Northampton, Wigan, and Hinckley to William Hodson, offering lecture rooms so that he could explain the community to sympathizers. Hodson announced that as soon as a sufficient number were obtained he would " lay down an itinerary ".² Probably one reason for this interest was Hodson's insistence on the fact that dissatisfied socialists had no need to emigrate to the backwoods utopias of the United States of America, or settlements in the colonies.³ As he said, 26,388,907 of the 60,038,907 acres of cultivable land in England was being cultivated, and of this residue over 5,000,000 acres was capable of bearing grain. He went on :

The schemes of that class of men who think it better to go abroad than to produce at home, have often struck us as absurd. . . . These incorporations (i.e. communitarian settlements) would be far more likely to prove successful than attempts to colonise Van Diemen's Land or New Zealand.⁴

V

Unusually fine weather marked the August of 1840. This enabled the communionists to gather their harvest of wheat, mustard and oats. The last two alone were estimated to bring in £900.⁵ To this task all hands were turned, for, as *The Working Bee* said : " in the ideal communities of Sir T. More, and in the existing communities in America, the plan is said to be adopted at harvest time of all hands leaving their customary occupations to gather the corn." Even the " gymnastic apparatus " was put aside.

The desire for union with Tytherly showed itself. " Union, Union " cried *The Working Bee* of 5 September. Three weeks later, lamenting that Tytherly was to be abandoned (for the

¹ A death had already occurred, also in Hodson's family (of his daughter) on 15 January 1840.

² *The Working Bee*, 11 July 1840.

³ For the most comprehensive account of these see A. E. Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*. (Pennsylvania, 1950)

⁴ *The Working Bee*, 11 July 1840.

⁵ *Ibid.* 29 August 1840.

dissensions there had become so acute that C. F. Green had been instructed to reduce the membership), *The Working Bee* was plaintively asking its readers to "take goods manufactured by the hands of co-operators. If, my friends, you will do this, without any other subscription, we soon shall be able to offer a model community to you."

Certainly Manea Fen seemed healthier than Tytherly, where numbers had now sunk to nineteen—of which seven were children of ten years of age and under. To this some fifteen or so hired labourers should be added, making the total thirty-five. Manea Fen, on the other hand, had fifty "in community"—and showed how they were deployed: fifteen in thrashing oats for market, eighteen in claying the land, six on *The Working Bee*, three gardeners, a schoolmaster, brickmakers and the remainder employed in various tasks. All that was needed was a market for their products.¹ As Hodson argued:

What can be made or effected in community, let it be purchased by Socialists. The profits accruing therefrom would enable us to start some other branch of manufacture, more than we have now. If every Socialist wore the stockings made in community, very soon would we be enabled to send cotton and linen goods to wear, and thus bring into community many of that injured race existing in the manufacturing districts.

And, referring to his approaching tour—the prelude to a society independent of the Owenites with auxiliary branches of its own, he wrote:

I shall in my tour form societies, the members of which will stand pledged, so long as they continue members, to purchase all articles of our manufacture, without injury to their interest. Depots will be formed, conducted by trustworthy and creditable parties, with a Grand Central Depot in London—to and from which all transactions will proceed.

This courageous, forward-looking policy seemed to attract those who had found the dissensions in the two other communities unbearable. From Tytherly returned two craftsmen who had previously belonged to the Manea Fen community: Storey, a brickmaker, and Collinson, a printer; while from the Pant Glas community (now broken up) came Robert Reed, and another, Horner, a printer, applied to return. *The Working Bee*, with a hint of sanctimony, announced: "sincerely do we

¹ F. Podmore, op. cit. p. 537; *The Working Bee*, 26 September 1840.

hope we shall be enabled to provide an asylum to those who have been debarred from continuing their exertions elsewhere.”¹

There seemed to be an open challenge to Robert Owen and the old Guard of the Rational Religionists being formulated. B. Warden attacked “the social priesthood” of Owen’s “missionaries” and suggested that they would be more useful in a community than on a lecture platform.² Yet at the same time Hodson was negotiating with the Owenite Central Board for a union on the basis of self-governing communities. He was probably induced to do this because Owen, William Galpin, and F. Bate (who had engraved a picture of the Manea Fen community) had formed “The Home Colonisation Society” to provide funds for Tytherly without straining the finances of the Central Board. Hodson’s idea was that the Central Board should raise money to lend, and that all future communities should emanate from those already in existence. His proposal was defeated by sixteen votes to four.³

VI

The rejection of Hodson’s overtures threw the Manea Fen colony back to its own resources—and the coming winter. How were they to sell the products of their labour? *The Working Bee* suggested that if every one of its 5,000 readers bought a pair of stockings it would keep three stocking makers active for a year.⁴ But this alone would not repay the outlay—some £6,000—on the blacksmiths shop, the printing office, the file shed, the brick kiln, the windmill, the twenty-four houses, the dining rooms, the kitchen, the sleeping apartments and the outhouses.

So the members of the community held a meeting in order to solve the problem. Hodson agreed to give up the presidency (he preferred to do so) in order to travel for the community and “live to carry forward the good cause of communities”. From what he said, it was largely due to his wife that he took this decision, for, he confessed, “Mrs. Hodson is not a Socialist”.⁵

¹ *The Working Bee*, 26 September 1840.

⁴ *Ibid.* 10 October 1840.

² *Ibid.* 3 October 1840.

⁵ *Ibid.* 31 October 1840.

³ *Ibid.*

He was described by a reporter for the *Liverpool Albion* who visited the community at this time as :

a man well fitted for the enterprise he has undertaken : in the prime of life, with an athletic frame which fits him for the physical difficulties of his situation. He possesses a mind of great energy and high intellectual capabilities.

The *Liverpool Albion* reporter was impressed by the community too ; its teetotalism and sobriety, its adherence to majority rule, and its business-like nature. For the members, he went on, hold the estate on a twenty-one year lease, paying 5 per cent. interest on the purchase money as rent. Hodson was described as having advanced £2,000 for which he held notes-of-hand, and as having spent £3,000 on the buildings. "There is no lack of exertion", commented the writer, indicating the fifty-five acres of oats, the eight stacks of wheat, and the seventeen acres of mustard, and continued, "Amidst all their worldly-wise proceedings it would seem they have a dash of romance about them . . . all proceed to the fields with music at their head." He was much impressed with their two boats, their project for a railway, the chemical enthusiasm of Hodson himself—made manifest in the evening classes, and especially the uniform dress :

The men wear a green habit . . . presenting an appearance somewhat like the representation of Robin Hood and his foresters, or of the Swiss mountaineers. The dress of the females is much the same as the usual fashion, with trousers, and the hair worn in ringlets. . . . They are quite the lions of the villages round about.¹

Six years of maritime life had endowed Hodson with a tendency to speak out when things displeased him and he had earlier asked the colonists that, if at any time they observed "too great a levity" in his proceedings, he "would esteem it a favour to be corrected by them."² The significance of these remarks was now borne in upon the colonists as the winter closed in about them. With his non-Socialist wife at his elbow, Hodson's stock of both money and patience, seemed to run out. Distrusted by the editor of the *New Moral World*, his overtures rejected by the Central Board, faced with the prospect of having to finance the community from his own resources, and deprived of the

¹ *The Working Bee*, 28 November 1840.

² *Ibid.* 5 February 1840.

comfortable security of his friend James Hill's bank (which failed in 1840), he seems to have run into personal difficulties and a circular was issued by the trustees of the community concerning his conduct. *The New Moral World* remarked that this "raised so many questions of business and law that we must make ourselves fully acquainted with the facts and bearings of the case, before we can venture to do more than thus allude to the matter".¹

The grisly end of the whole experiment was soon painfully documented. The members of the community, convinced of Hodson's unfitness of the post, were powerless to force him out because they depended on him for "pecuniary advances". Three days before Christmas 1840, Hodson gave orders to the meat contractors to stop deliveries to the community. A public meeting of the communitarians decided to take over management, do away with hired labour, dispose of the lighters and to consult a solicitor. Hodson's reply was to seize the books. Another members' meeting was convened on Christmas Day, and the members unanimously condemned his action. There, however, unanimity ended. A pro-Hodson party formed and when, four days later, another members' meeting was convened, to ask for the books, Hodson pointed out that he possessed the money obtained by the sale of the crops, and when they demanded it, he replied that it was in the hands of "a gentleman in March".

Tension mounted. *The Working Bee* ceased publication. The leader of the anti-Hodsonians, the oldest member of the community, William Davidge, was obviously the main target for Hodson's anger and on 30 February, one of the pro-Hodsonians shot at him with a gun. What is worse, the pro-Hodsonians formed a kind of terrorist group. *The New Moral World* reported "men with bludgeons have constantly been about the premises; the shops and rooms have been broken into and their contents taken out. Nearly all the members have now resigned. The remainder are determined to obtain possession if they can."²

¹ *The New Moral World*, 9 January 1841.

² *Ibid.* 20 February 1841.

It was a hopeless task which they soon abandoned. Ten years later, Robert Gardner could write :

From 100 to 200 of the disciples of Robert Owen, commonly called Owenites, located themselves here for about 12 months, within the last few years. They occupied 150 acres of land, had everything in common, according to their system ; and published (whilst here) a paper or pamphlet called *The Working Bee*. But alas ! for the mutability of human institutions, the Socialists have fled.¹

And today, the only memorial of their lively presence at Manea Fen is the name Colony Farm.

¹ Robert Gardner, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Cambridgeshire* (Peterborough, 1851), p. 497.