

Social reformer had a vision of harmonious community in Hampshire



Robert Owen

HE TRIED TO MAKE UTOPIA HERE

By GLADYS HUGGINS

ROBERT OWEN was a famous Socialist and reformer of the early 19th century. His practical experiments in his New Lanark Mills, which he took over in 1799, aroused much interest, especially as they did not interfere with his success as a businessman.

In a world where most working people lived in squalor, and there was much drunkenness and vice, he was anxious to improve the moral standards. To achieve this he felt that better living conditions must be provided.

Finding that the vast majority of the people did not want to be better, and that England was not ready for moral reform, Owen and others decided to establish a model community in America.

In 1825 he spent a large proportion of his fortune in establishing a community under the name of "New Harmony" in Indiana.

It was short-lived. The industrious resented the fact that they did not do their fair share towards making the community a success and quarrels broke out. The community disintegrated and Owen lost all his money.

With the growth of his Utopian ideas the commonsense which had made him a successful businessman disappeared.

In 1839 the only "Harmony Hall" in Britain ever to be personally erected by Owen, and his most lavish experiment, was founded at East Tytherley, in Hampshire on the Wiltshire border, about 12 miles from Salisbury. Although the land was in Tytherley, the buildings were on the outskirts of Broughton.

On October 1 the newly-formed Rational Religionists Society took over the Queenwood estate of 633 acres from Sir Isaac Goldsmid. The rent was £250 with a premium of £750, the lease to run for 99 years.

It was a beautiful spot in a rising wooded village and the rising ground between the buildings from the north. All visitors remarked on the beautiful avenue of yew trees.

This is one description: "The straight and polished stems shoot up to a considerable height and then throw their branches across the road, forming a close resemblance to the aisle of a cathedral. Words cannot give a correct idea of that beautiful walk. The perspective effect is most striking."

BACKED BY CO-OP CONGRESS

to send 18 experienced men to Queenwood—a ploughman, three hedgers and ditchers, and carpenters and smiths.

PROMOTING HAPPINESS

DURING the first few months good reports were received from Queenwood. The members were content with the old farm buildings already there, and erected a large dining hall with stained glass windows, and decorated inside with paintings and engravings. This was also used as a lecture room and there were sleeping rooms above.

"Our days," Aldham writes, "are spent in united industry, our meetings in mutual improvement. Our simple meals have the relish of good appetites and the charm of social conversation, and a generous spirit pervades us as to who shall most promote the general happiness, and be most obliging and useful."

Who could see us early in the morning, washed and shaved, seated at our books reading or writing, then taking our wholesome meal of the nutritious products of the dairy, waiting after this till the grey mists of morning are dispelled to commence our day's labours. For the enjoyment of our delightful colony—who could see all this and say that we lived in a sty! (Sty is an allusion to a newspaper attack).

After tea and public business from 5.30 the evenings were spent in study and enjoyment.

Sunday was a day of rest, but members met in the new dining hall "to hear the Gospel of Peace and Universal Fraternity" preached. Crowds came from a wide area to hear what the Socialists had to say for themselves.

OPPOSED BY

method of valuation, and the over sight of a considerable number of debts.

In the auditor's estimate there was a deficit of £533, but the committee appointed by Congress to comment on their report presented a more favourable picture by saying that the value of the lease had been increased by improvements to the farm.

After careful examination of the kitchen accounts for the previous six months the auditors found that the actual cost of maintenance of each adult, exclusive of rent, was 7s. 1d. a week.

Table with 2 columns: Item, Amount. Includes Tea and Coffee, Sugar, Butter, Bread, Fresh Meat, Clothing, Fuel, Candies, Soap, Pocket Money.

Greater economy was urged in the use of tea, coffee, sugar, flesh meat, and butter and as far as possible residents should be content with food actually produced on the farm.

MORE MONEY WANTED

THE committee's treatment of the auditors' figures caused further misgivings and a further statement of the estimated revenue and expenditure on the farm during the coming year was not reassuring.

The sum of £350 was included for the labour rent, which had already advanced at the absurdly low rate of 2 1/2 per cent. there was an estimated deficit of £316.

The comment on this estimate was: "The farm has not been, and cannot at present be made self supporting. Other branches of industry must be added, a school opened and boarders taken on other means taken to make the establishment profitable to the society."

"To obtain this more money must be spent on the buildings and capital to continue in need, and also the expense of

OWEN IS EXONERATED

AT the annual conference in May, 1842, the Finance Committee still looked through rose-coloured spectacles when it reported that £18,963 had been expended on the property, but a statement showed that it was of much greater value. Two months later, however, a special meeting of Congress was called to consider the state of Queenwood.

The Governor had been given a free hand on the understanding that no debts were incurred, but relying on promises of support, which were never fulfilled, he had committed the society to large sums. There were pressing liabilities of upwards of £2,000, and urgent need for at least £3,000 to complete what had already been started.

Members of the Home Colonisation Society agreed to waive any claim for the repayment of their loans and the interest, until the Central Board agreed that funds would stand it.

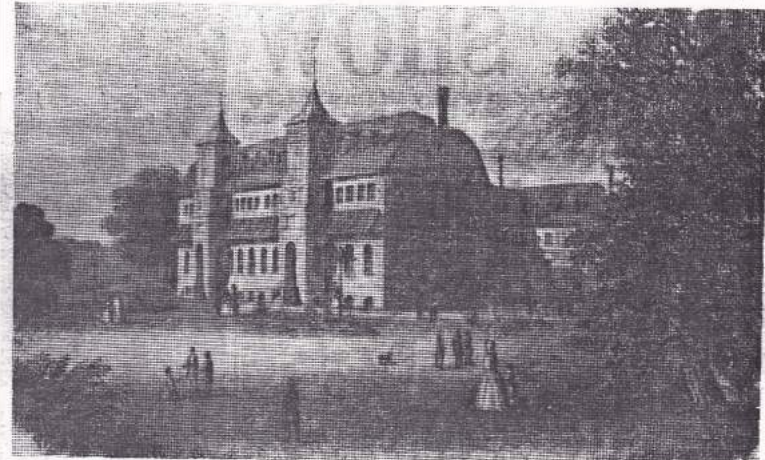
In a long speech Owen justified his actions but resigned as Governor of the colony and editor of the "New Moral World." He stated that he would "not dissent more for the above until they were discharged."

The Congress unanimously exonerated Owen and the committee from blame and urged that £30,000 had already been expended on the community, members should do all in their power to procure the £5,000 more which was needed to make the experiment a success.

VISITORS'

95

595 PART 2



Harmony Hall, afterwards Queenwood College, from an illustration in the college prospectus.

had been stopped, so the meal was now bread and water only; and the Sunday meal, to save the labour for the women, was simply coffee and bread and butter. On the whole, however, goodwill and helpfulness still continued.

When Pinch went to America in the early summer of 1843, Owen again became governor. In this year a prospectus signed by Owen, as president, and the Central Board, invited the public to subscribe not the £8,000 estimated at the last Congress, but £25,000.

This included £7,500 for building and furnishing an industrial school for 500 children and more furniture for the school already in existence. In response to this about £1,900 was subscribed.

In May, 1844, there were 94 children in the schools—64 paying fees. The school course included, besides the usual routine—geography, astronomy, drawing, painting in oils, vocal and instrumental music, geometry, land surveying and French and German. The fees remained at £26 a year, including clothes, although the estimated cost for each resident was £27 10s. per annum.

As there was dissatisfaction because almost all of the funds of the Central Board had been expended in 1844, the Governor decided not to appoint Owen as governor again. As Owen was still very popular this called for courage. The matter was settled more easily than expected because Owen would not consent to his actions being curbed in any way.

IN A SAD STATE

and ball had been postponed to welcome Owen, now 74 years of age, on his return from America. When tea was over and the customary social hymn had been sung, Owen gave an address and joined in the grand march and the first country dance before retiring to rest.

END IN SONG AND DANCE

THE residents sang and danced alternately until after midnight. This was probably the last social festival at Harmony Hall, as the winding up commenced without delay.

The leases of two of the farms were taken over and carried with them most of the remaining residents. The others gradually disappeared.

The last governor, John Buxton, who was also one of the Assignees appointed in 1845, remained in the Hall until June, 1846.

The financial affairs were very complicated and no agreement could be reached, and at last Pinch, one of the original trustees, acting on legal advice, took forcible possession of the property, and after due notice turned Buxton and his family out.

Buxton insisted on remaining by the roadside in a tent, and it was here that the Congress summoned by him to meet at Harmony Hall at the end of June, began its proceedings, but ultimately adjourned to Rose Hill, the small manor house which Owen had bought.

Here resolutions were passed recognising the legal rights of the trustees and at last were passed unanimously.

"HOLDEST OF

willc
H. G. May