

HARMONY HALL WAS NOT SO HARMONIOUS

ROBERT OWEN (1771-1858) was one of the most remarkable men of his time, and if he had not been so optimistic about human nature his life would have been counted a success. But he is remembered chiefly for his failure to usher in the millenium by means of Utopian communities, one of which was established in Hampshire. Many books have been written about him and his theories, but Prof. J. F. C. Harrison's full-scale study* is the first to deal with Owen and the Owenites on both sides of the Atlantic in terms of a "quest for the New Moral World".

Owen's was one of the fortunes made during the boom years of the Industrial Revolution. With borrowed capital he moved into the cotton spinning business and while still a young man became sole manager and principal partner of the largest cotton spinning factory in Britain. His schemes of education and social welfare for the employees of his New Lanark factory excited much interest, and he began to talk of extending these ideas to society at large.

His name, writes Prof. Harrison, was everywhere linked with successful, paternalistic schemes for improving the lot of the poor, and in this role he at first gained the support of the Duke of Kent (Queen Victoria's father) and influential members of the landed interest and business world.

But when he went on to attack basic institutions of society, such as the family and churches, sympathy in high quarters soon ebbed away. "By 1824 he concluded that progress along this particular road of social reform was likely to be slow and frustrating, and that a fresh start might be rewarding. In the summer of 1824 he decided to leave New Lanark and go to America to found a community."

Millenium

This period of his life marked the end of his association with business, established his reputation as a radical social reformer, and attracted disciples in two continents. His New Harmony in Indiana did not flourish as he had hoped, and the experiment was abandoned in 1827 when he returned to England "considerably poorer in pocket but not in conviction and enthusiasm."

During his absence his theories (now called "socialism") had attracted much interest among working men who were keen to adapt them to their needs, and for a short time Owen found himself the acknowledged leader of the working classes. But the national

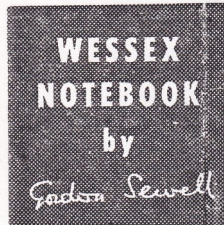
* "ROBERT OWEN AND THE OWENITES IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA" (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 70s.).

federation of trade unions, which he headed, suddenly collapsed, and in 1839 Owen and his followers again turned their attention to community building—this time at Tytherley in Hampshire.

Though he rejected Christianity, Owen was never tired of reiterating his belief that the redemption of mankind was at hand. For 40 years, Prof. Harrison tells us, he announced each new venture, whether it was the American community at New Harmony, the National Equitable Labour Exchange, or Harmony Hall in Hampshire, as the beginning of the millenium.

Baronial style

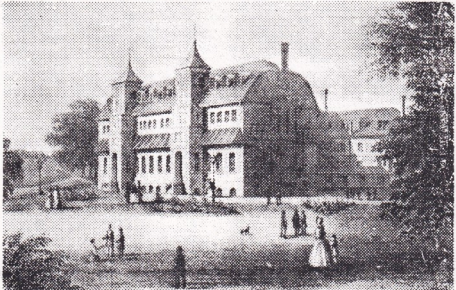
In the first number of his periodical "New Moral World" he announced that "the rubicon between the Old Immoral and



the New Moral World is finally passed," and enthusiastic followers dated their letters from the beginning of the new dispensation.

At Queenwood House—the Hampshire Harmony Hall—the letters "CM" (Commencement of the Millenium) were carved on the outside of the building!

The land for the new community—some 533 acres at East Tytherley—was leased from Sir Isaac Goldsmid, a London banker and philanthropist, and a capital sum of £30,000 was raised, partly by small subscriptions from Owenites in all



Queenwood House — the Hampshire Harmony Hall at East Tytherley.

parts of the country and partly from wealthy backers. A Home Colonisation Society was founded to raise funds for the venture, and the money was soon spent.

A large building "in the baronial style," was designed by Joseph Hansom, an Owenite architect, and fitted out "with every comfort and labour-saving device." The largest number of members resident at any one time was 57, but there were in addition 90 pupils at the boarding school which was the most successful of the community's activities.

The community members, mostly artisans from Norwich industrial towns, did not take kindly to farming, and local labour had to be employed. Even then, the farms raised only enough food for home consumption and financial difficulties multiplied with the years.

George Holyoake, one of Owen's closest associates, described Queenwood House in lyrical terms. No cathedral was ever built so reverently, he said. "Home-made nails, not machine-made, were used in the work out of sight . . . The great kitchen was wainscoted with mahogany halfway up the walls."

Upset by quarrels

As Prof. Harrison comments, Queenwood House may have made sense as a fitting building for the Commencement of the Millenium, but "as a wise use of the capital available it was exceedingly questionable."

However, "Owen was never a man to think small. Everything he undertook was on a grand scale, and Queenwood was his last practical effort to translate his vision of the new moral world into reality."

Life seems to have been earned and even regimented in the Hampshire Harmony Hall, but the alleged immoral goings-on of the socialists at Queenwood were a by-word to respectable citizens, and Henry Phillips, Bishop of Exeter, led the attack on the Owenites in a House of Lords speech which referred darkly to the extensive estate which they had acquired for a socialist community in Hampshire. But the Government refused to be in the least alarmed by the Bishop's hair-raising allegations, and in the year which saw the opening of Harmony Hall Robert Owen was presented at Court.

There must have been many like Charles Bray, a socially-minded Midlands manufacturer, who for a time entertained great hopes for the Hampshire experiment. They were destined to be bitterly disappointed, however. Not only did the scheme founder on the rocks of finance, but it also failed in human terms. When Owen visited Queenwood in April, 1842, he was upset by the quarrels between the resi-



Robert Owen

dents, as he had been years previously at New Harmony in America.

Owen's epitaph

The community was run on paternalistic rather than democratic lines, and in 1844 a group of working class members revolted and took over the community, but they were no more successful than was the former governing committee, and in the following summer most of the residents left. John Buxton, the last governor, stayed on with his family until the summer of 1846 when he was forcibly evicted, and the premises were let as a college.

By then even George Holyoake had lost faith in community building as a method of establishing the millenium.

But Robert Owen's achievement was no mean one, as his epitaph on the Owen memorial in Kensal Green Cemetery reminds us:

"He originated and organised infant schools. He secured a reduction of the hours of labour for women and children in factories. He was a liberal supporter of the earlier efforts to obtain national education. He laboured to promote international arbitration."

"He was one of the foremost Englishmen who taught men to aspire to a higher social state by reconciling the interests of capital and labour. He spent his life and a large fortune seeking to improve his fellowmen by giving them education, self-reliance and moral worth. His life was sanctified by human affection and lofty effort."

HARTLEY WINTNEY W.I.

The April meeting of Hartley Wintney WI with the president Mrs Joar Howse in the chair, featured a cookery demonstration by Miss Valerie Harbin.

Miss Harbin prepared a complete menu for a six dinner party, and impressed members with her calmness. Written instructions for all recipes used were available for members.

The bring and buy stall was in good demand, and the competition for a round of shortcake, was won by Mrs. E. Barnard.