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"... final destruction exactly fifty years ago this month."

"HARMONY HALL" IN HAMPSHIRE

An Early Socialist Experiment

Passing out of the pretty little village of Broughton with its many half-timbered cottages, one comes, at the foot of Broughton Hill, to the road fork where the major road runs off to Mottisfont and a smaller road, away to the right, to East Tytherley. Taking this East Tytherley road, only a short distance along its track, one passes Queenwood Farm on the left, a collection of modern buildings with a few older cottages and a number of ruined walls, which suggest to the more observant passer-by that here was once something much more than the present farm.

It is true that there was something far more than a farm; it was, in fact, Robert Owen's "Harmony Hall," the first Socialist experiment in this part of the country at least, which came to grief over a century ago and must have cost some of its supporters a small fortune.

Robert Owen was a Welsh Socialist and philanthropist, years in advance of his time. In his young days he ran cotton factories which employed no children under ten and established a 10½ hours working day for adults, yet his industrial success in that sphere partially silenced his critics. He established his "Consolidated Trade Union" which secured a very large membership until the Tolpuddle prosecution put a forced end to his union work.

Robert Owen's scheme for setting up a Socialist community in Hampshire was also one of his less fortunate ventures. He himself must have been a fairly wealthy man and he found others prepared to put up money for the project. A Salisbury banker by the name of Galpin put up £8000, Mr. F. Bate £14,000, and other large

sums were subscribed by William Pare and G. J. Holyoake, while many working folk gave all their small savings to launch the project. Two farms were rented on a 99 years' lease—Queenwood and Buckholt—and turned into one estate which Owen designated as "Harmony Hall." New buildings designed by the architect for the Birmingham Town Hall must have been quite an impressive set-up, and altogether something like £30,000 was said to have been used up in building and setting the establishment going.

Robert Owen succeeded in getting some 57 men, women and children on to the estate. They were mostly weavers, who, at that time, were having to choose between giving up the work which they had been doing in their homes for generations past, or going into the big mills which were being set up, or changing their type of work. The seeds of failure were already sown. Work on the land in those days—as now—is something which one needs to be trained to in one's earliest years, and Owen's north-country weavers could never have hoped to have made a success of the fair, but not unprofitable, chalkland soil of the East Tytherley farm. Added to that, they had the difficulties which naturally arise from living under a new and untried communal scheme. For they set out to live communally, to share their costs and their profits. It is interesting to note that the actual cost of maintaining each adult on the estate (exclusive of rent) was put at 7s. 1d. Most of that money of course was used for food though it did include 7d. for clothing, 1s. 3d. for fuel, candles and soap, and 1s. for pocket money.

It was in 1839 that the venture opened and, after only a few months, more than half of the pioneers had deserted and returned to their northern homes. The farms were kept going for quite a time longer by hiring labourers in the area (at 8s. per week), but by 1845 the end was in sight. Actually in 1844 it is stated that the expenditure on the farm was more than double the receipts. In 1845, George Edmondson, a Quaker, took over the property with the object of developing it into an educational institution. He turned it into "Queenwood College" and his enthusiasm made it quite a successful institution which had quite a remarkable reputation. Its most notable scholar was Henry Fawcett, who was Postmaster General in 1880 when the parcel post was instituted.

So, Queenwood College continued until its final destruction exactly fifty years ago this month by fire. There are still to-day many people about who obtained their early tuition there, and indeed, its reputation as a college still persists. But there are few who know of its earlier and short history as a Socialist experiment of the 57 weavers and their families from the north who tried to live on the land in Hampshire on a communal basis, in days long before Socialism was a political force on the land.



Cottages at Queenwood Farm, East Tytherley—a conversion from the laundry, part of Robert Owen's Socialist experimental agricultural settlement there in the 19th century