

James Ewing Ritchie

**Freehold Land Societies: Their
History, Present Position, and
Claims**



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Freehold Land Societies: Their History, Present Position, and Claims

“The laws of this country recognise nothing more sacred than the Forty-shilling Freehold Franchise; and a vote for the county obtained by these means is both constitutional and laudable.”

– Lord Chief-Justice Tindal.

“What he had heard from hon. members told him nothing more than this, that the working population could easily, under the old system, acquire the right of voting; and that every man who owned forty shillings a-year could entitle himself to vote. Were they to be told that the people of England were so degraded, so besotted, so dead to all sense of their true interests, that they could make no efforts to possess themselves of the franchise?”

– Mr. Disraeli.

ADVERTISEMENT

The following pages are reprinted from the “Weekly News and Chronicle” – the only Paper that aims to be the organ of the Freehold Land Movement. They are now published in the hope that they may win for that movement a wider support and a heartier sympathy than it has already secured. It is a child – it will be a giant ere long.

3, Clifford's Inn.

April 1853.

FREEHOLD LAND SOCIETIES: THEIR HISTORY, PRESENT POSITION, AND CLAIMS

The Freehold Land Movement is the great fact of the age. We propose to consider it in its origin, its present position as a means of investment for the middle and working-classes, and in its political and social and moral bearings. We propose to tell what it has done, and what it seeks to do. Born of a working-man, it especially aims at the elevation of working-men. It comes to them, and offers them independence, wealth, and political power. Conceived in a provincial town, its ramifications now extend through the land. It demands no mean place in the consideration of the influences now at work for realising a future brighter and better than the past. The philosopher, the political economist, and the philanthropist must alike, then, deem it worthy of serious regard. On the part of a people, the absence of recklessness and waste is a great good; but the formation of industrial and economical habits is a still greater good. From such plain, unpoetical traits of national character are born the arts and the graces, and all that is civilised and refined in life. A rich people is not less virtuous, and is certainly far happier, than a poor one. Therefore we say, let the Freehold Movement have wide support, for it is a schoolmaster, teaching the path

leading the people of this country to wealth, and to the power and independence which wealth alone can give. Thus much by way of introduction. That our readers may fully understand the subject, we shall begin at the beginning, and explain.

I. – THE CONSTITUTION OF A FREEHOLD LAND SOCIETY

Some time back the *Times* asked scornfully, as Pilate of old did concerning truth, what was a Freehold Land Society. We reply, viewed in a business light, it is simply a society for the purchase of land. It involves two commercial principles well understood – that purchasers should buy in the cheapest market, and that societies can do what individuals cannot. Till the movement originated, the purchaser of a small plot of ground had to pay in lawyer's expenses connected with the purchase frequently as much as he paid for the plot itself. A society buys a large piece of ground. They make roads through it; they drain it; they turn it into valuable building-land; they thus raise its value; and they divide it amongst their members, not at the price at which each allotment is worth, but at the price which each allotment has cost. Being also registered under the Friendly Societies Act, the conveyance costs the purchaser generally from 25s. to 30s.; and thus a plot worth £50 is often put into the fortunate allottee's hands for half that sum. Of course, different societies have different rules, but they all aim at the same end,

and effect that end in pretty nearly a similar manner. Thus a member generally, if he subscribes for a share of £30, pays a shilling a-week, and a trifling sum a-quarter for expenses. With the money thus raised an estate is purchased. It is then cut up into allotments, and balloted for. If the subscriber has paid up, he, of course, takes the land, and there is an end of the matter. If he has not, the society gives him his allotment, but saddled with a mortgage. In some societies the members are served by rotation, and “first come” are “first served.” The more generally-adopted plan, however, is division by ballot. There has been some doubt as to the legality of the ballot; the Conservative Society have taken the opinion of eminent counsel upon this matter, and their opinion is, that the ballot is perfectly legal. The rotation societies offer no inducements to new members to join them; so division by ballot has come to be almost the universal rule. In the National, for instance, there was a ballot daily for all subscribers of three months’ standing. This has recently been altered. A ballot takes place every day, to which all are eligible whose subscriptions are paid up. If you join the National, you may go to the ballot immediately.

As the National is the largest of the existing Freehold Land Societies – last year its receipts being £190,070 – we will briefly allude to its prospectus as a still further illustration of what a Freehold Land Society is. The especial objects of this Society are described as “to facilitate the acquisition of freehold land, and the erection of houses thereon; to enable such of its members as

are eligible to obtain the county franchise, and to afford to all of them a secure and profitable investment for money.” In the National, all the expenses are defrayed out of a common fund; consequently, there are no extra charges, and the net profits, after payment of interest on subscriptions in advance and on completed shares, are annually divided amongst the holders of uncompleted shares. In this way last year the National divided £3,161. 19s. 3d., and the directors credited each unadvanced share with profit at the rate of £10. 16s. 8d. per cent. per annum. We only add, as a still further explanation of the societies in general, that they are all conducted on the most perfectly democratic principles. Vote by ballot and universal suffrage are the rule with them. The members elect their own officers. In all the societies, also, provision is made for casualties, such as sickness or death. In case of death, the subscriber’s widow or heirs take his place. If he be unable, from sickness or poverty, to continue his subscription, he is not fined, but is allowed to wait for better times. If he wishes his money back, he can have it returned, with a slight reduction for the working expenses of the Society. Juniors may be members. Actually these societies so far practically admit woman’s rights as to offer to the ladies the same desirable investments they offer to the sterner sex. In short, the Freehold Land Movement appeals to all ranks and conditions of the community. It may be said of a Freehold Land Society what has often been said of the London Tavern, that it is open to all – who can pay.

II. ORIGIN AND PRESENT POSITION OF THE MOVEMENT

Primarily the movement was political, and was established for the purpose of giving the people of this country the political power which they at present lack. Originally the forty-shilling freehold was established to put down universal suffrage. As a part and parcel of the British constitution it has been religiously preserved to the present time, and threatens to be an excellent substitute for what it was originally intended to destroy. During the Anti-Corn-Law agitation Mr. Cobden had put the free-traders up to the idea of purchasing forty-shilling freeholds, but it was reserved to Mr. James Taylor, of Birmingham, to give to the idea of Mr. Cobden a universality of which the latter never dreamed; Mr. Taylor had been a purchaser of land more than once, and with the purchase he got an abstract, a legal document, which when he came to understand it, showed him that he had paid to the vendor much more than it cost him. The idea then struck him that as the wholesale price of land was much greater than the retail, if the working men could be got to subscribe together a large sum for the purchase of land, they could thus have, at a wholesale price, a stake in the country and a vote, and when the general election came and excitement was created, Mr. Taylor felt that the time for action was arrived. Accordingly, when he went to tender his

vote, he said to a friend who accompanied him, "here's a lot of fellows, and all that they can do is to grin and yawn when I go in to poll; I have a strong notion that I can get them into the booth." This friend said, "How?" The answer was, "Meet me to night in the Temperance Hotel." That same evening Mr. Taylor and his friend drew up an advertisement, stating that "it is expedient that a Freehold Land Society be formed for the purpose of obtaining freehold property at a most reasonable cost to, and to get country votes for, the working men." Simultaneously with the advertisement in the local paper appeared a leader from the editor, recognising the immense importance of the movement thus commenced. Thus pledged to go on, Mr. Taylor threw his heart and soul into the cause. Within a week a committee was formed, and the support of the principal men in the town secured. December, 1849 is the legal date of the Freehold Land Movement, although the Birmingham Society had been in existence nearly two years previous. In that month the rules of the society were certified, and the glorious idea of Mr. Taylor had a legal habitation and a name. At the end of the first year the Birmingham society reported that it had established six independent societies, in which more than two thousand members had subscribed for three thousand shares; that in Birmingham alone the subscriptions amounted to £500 per month, and that it had already given allotments to nearly two hundred of its members. Before the termination of the second year a great conference was held in Birmingham

in order to organise a plan of general union and co-operation amongst the various societies. Delegates from all parts of the country were present. In Birmingham it appeared £13,000 had been subscribed and four estates purchased, two thousand five hundred shares being taken up by one thousand eight hundred subscribers. Wolverhampton, Leicester, Stourbridge, had all co-operated zealously in the movement. Nor was the metropolis behind. The National had started with seven hundred and fifty members subscribing for one thousand five hundred shares, and already had £1,900 paid up. In Marylebone eight hundred shares had been taken since the previous July. This conference was attended by Messrs. Cobden, Bright, G. Thompson, Scholefield, Bass, and Sir Joshua Walmsley. This conference, of course, attracted the notice of the press. The coldly, critical *Spectator* termed it a "middle-class movement." *Tait* so far forgot himself as to characterise it as "political swindling." The *Times* said the working-classes were being deluded by it. For once the *Standard* agreed with the *Times* and said ditto. However the conference did its work, and started the *Freeholder*, which appeared on the 1st of January, 1850. A second conference was held at Birmingham in November, 1850. The report, as usual, was encouraging. Eighty societies, many of them with branches, were reported as existing. The number of members was thirty thousand subscribing for forty thousand shares. The amount of paid-up contributions was £170,000. A third conference was held in London in November, 1851. The report then stated there

were one hundred societies with forty-five thousand members subscribing for sixty-five thousand shares. One hundred and fifty estates had been purchased, twelve thousand allotments made, £400,000 had actually been received, and two millions of pounds sterling was actually being subscribed for. At the fourth conference, held in 1852, it appeared still greater progress had been made. One hundred and thirty societies, with eighty-five thousand members subscribing for a hundred and twenty thousand shares, were in existence, three hundred and ten estates had been purchased, nineteen thousand five hundred allotments had been made, and £790,000 had been received. Estimating the shares at the average of £30 per share, the total amount subscribed for was three millions six hundred thousand pounds. Such, then, is the movement at the present time. It has been obscured by no cloud. Its progress has been unchecked. No disappointment has retarded its onward way. Forward to victory has been its march. All classes and sects have railed round it. For churchmen there exists a Church of England Society. The Conservatives have formed a large and flourishing society for the manufacture of Conservative votes. The movement sneered at, derided, misrepresented, declared unconstitutional, a swindle like a celebrated land scheme popular with the Chartists, has now come to be admitted by all as the greatest fact of the age: to aid it, grave and reverend churchmen, statesmen of all shades of political options, combine; even coronetted lords now rejoice to lend it their sanction, and the weight of their illustrious names.

Truly the mustard seed has branched out into a giant oak. A little leaven has leavened the whole lump.

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