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Infidels and Revolutionaries: A Study of the Hodsonian Intentional
Community at Manea Fen 1838 – 1841.

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Submitted for the Open University M.A. in History

4th January 2022

15,108 words

Abstract

This study explores a small Owenite intentional community experiment in the Cambridgeshire fens in the late 1830s inspired by William Hodson. It adopts a critical thematic approach to examine the social and culture production of the colony and to consider how these alternative world builders challenged the dominant culture in England in the opening decades of the 19th Century. In doing so it touches on such themes as the role of women in communal societies and the question of sexual equality and the power of ideas and actions to remake and reimagine the world.

To grasp the scale and impulse of the colony experiment this study is built round the documentary traces these colonists left through the words they published, rules they lived by and the observations of their friends and opponents.

This study concludes that the colony at Manea for the short duration of its existence succeeded in building an alternative culture – through the principles they adopted; the built environment they constructed; the daily rituals they followed, and through the propagandizing of their weekly newspaper the *Working Bee*.

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I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. No part of this dissertation has previously been submitted for a degree or other qualification at any other university or institution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Dan Weinbren for his invaluable assistance in supervising this dissertation. I would also like to thank Mary Burgess and her colleagues at the Cambridgeshire Collection local studies library and all the archivists and librarians who have made this study possible.

1. Introduction

Community does all possess
That can to man be given;
Community is happiness,
Community is heaven.¹

This study considers a radical intentional community experiment in the Cambridgeshire fens in the early decades of the 19th Century. There is a gap in the historiography which this work seeks to fill in relation to English alternative communities. This study moves away from a narrative driven life cycle approach which dominates the historiography of alternative communities in Britain, and instead adopts a thematic approach to explore the Hodsonian Community Society's culture and cultural production. Manea this study argues was a provocation to the values of existing society and offered potential responses to and possibilities for radical societal change and was part of a vibrant national and local radical counter-public. These alternative world builders lived what may well be called 'the examined life', and their deliberations imbued even many mundane facets of communal behaviours with symbolic significance.² It is important to recognise that they were experiments with all that implies. As William Hodson in the preamble to the rules of the society stated, the intentions of the colony were 'to continue only whilst their efficiency and usefulness should be perceived'.³

This study adopts a thematic approach – each chapter exploring a different aspect

¹ J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America : The Quest for the New Moral World* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969) p.137.

² Thad M. Van Bureen; Sarah A. Tarlow, 'The Interpretative Potential of Utopian Settlements.' *Historical Archaeology* 40.1 (2006). p.3.

³ Pryme.d.590. The Rules of the Hodsonian Community Society Manea Fen, Cambridgeshire.

of the life of the colony. Chapter one considers the act of communal living seeing it as representing no less than a major social experiment one which often runs counter to the dominant culture and where human behaviour, motivation, and interpersonal relations are put to the test. This study examines the colonies-built environment, its working day, the customs, and daily rituals which were adopted, and the rules followed. Chapter two examines both the role of women and the question of sexual equality. It considers a single incident concerning the communities first iteration to explore questions of sexual freedom and sexual equality in the context of early 19th Century England. It considers then the roles adopted by women in the community to assess in what ways this communal experiment did 'succeed' and in what ways it 'failed' - did theory ever match the colony's practice. Chapter three explores the colony's inhouse publication *The Working Bee*. Looking at its origins, content, and reception. It goes onto discuss the intersection between print and platform in promoting the community and the emergence of a vibrant local counter-public arguing that Manea was a single node on a well-established network of radical activism.

As historians, we are always dealing with a filtered and fragmented past. This study is dependent exclusively on written records – from within the community and from outside sources. The very ideological character of intentional communities magnifies the potential for written records to reflect highly subjective realities.⁴ Equally societies response via the medium of the national and local press could often be distorted and refracted through prejudicial eyes.

⁴ Stacy C. Kozakavich, *The Archaeology of Utopian and Intentional Communities* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2017) pp.51-52.

This study adopts the term *colony* and *colonist*. Colony captures the essential qualities of the Hodsonian Colony at Manea Fen: a place apart, of separation, a place where people come to build something new. It also adopts the concept of intentional community defining it as:

Composed of members united by a common vision of an ideal society, and/or by a shared commitment to provide an alternative to unacceptable conditions in the mainstream; voluntary for resident members; built with the goal of permanence; institutionally complete in design or intention; and physically or geographically separated from mainstream society.⁵

This study of the Hodsonian colony sits at the intersection of three main bodies of historical thought: concerning utopian communitarianism, early socialism, and feminism.

Barbara Taylor's work provides a detailed study of early feminism and socialism in Britain in the 19th Century. Taylor sees that late 19th century socialism lost the richness and multi-dimensionality of the early socialists particularly of the 'feminist impulse' encapsulated by Owenist concerns about sexual liberation and the democratizing of personal relations. The boundaries of discussion were narrowed relegating or ignoring the concerns of women pushing them to the margins and foregrounding economic struggles to the detriment of the socialist project.⁶ Taylor argues that feminism was central to utopian socialism most radical imaginaries and the Manea colony offers us some of the most 'militant feminist statements'

⁵ Stacy C. Kozakavich, 2017, p.14.

⁶ Taylor, 1983, pp.285-7.

expressed from within the Owenite movement.⁷ The colony becomes a site for exploring gender roles and the limits of sexual radicalism.

The best chronological overviews of the Manea colony are to be found in W. H. G. Armitage's work *Heaven's Below* in which he charts the colony from inception to its violent ending. Armitage's work is a compendium of English utopian settlements and experiments and is a significant work of scholarship but strays into a world of antiquarianism and it increasingly reads as a collection of interesting historical facts about marginal groups, with little historical context or critical insight. Dennis Hardy considers Manea as part of a wider survey of nineteenth century alternative communities. Hardy argues persuasively that community experiments should interest historians because they reveal as much about the societies which give rise to them and offer 'living examples of new reality that the rest of society might see and follow'.⁸ Criticism of both can be laid on the grounds they are purveyors of spin for intentional communities', and they reflect a tendency in the field of utopian and communitarian studies to become mired in subjectivity. John Langdon's work this study owes the greatest debt too, he is the pre-eminent historian of the Manea Fen colony.⁹ This study seeks to build on, but also diverges from Langdon, namely in not attempting a prosopographical database of members or trying to draw conclusions from limited evidence about the colonist's own experiences of communal living. It contests a number of his conclusions relating to the role women, and the questions surrounding the reconstitution of the first iteration of the community which are

⁷ Barbara Taylor, *Eve And The New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Verso, 1983) p.257.

⁸ Dennis Hardy, *Alternative Communities in Nineteenth Century England* (London: Longman, 1979) p.211.

⁹ W.H.G. Armitage, *Heavens Below*. (London: Routledge, 1961) pp.155-78; John, Langdon, *Pocket Editions of the New Jerusalem: Owenite Communitarianism in Britain 1825-1855* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of York, 2000); Langdon, John. "A Monument of Union." *Utopian Studies* 23.2 (2012)

explored in chapter two.¹⁰

This work is indebted to American studies of intentional communities particularly related to the fields of anthropology, sociology, and architecture. Kantor, Brown and Hayden have shaped research questions and approaches to such themes as the built environment, community life and community structures which are sadly lacking in works on English intentional community experiments.¹¹ Kantor and Hayden have drawbacks to their analysis which will be explored in chapter one, but they highlight the potential of social sciences and architectural studies to broaden our understanding of the commitment mechanism deployed and the use of architecture to create distinctive community spaces which re-enforced the communal ethos to those inside and outside the colony experiment.

Background

The early decades of the 19th Century were in the words of Walter Bagehot, a period where 'England was always uncomfortable: trade was bad, employment scarce, and all our industry dispersed, fluctuating and out of heart ...'¹² The transition from war to peace and the ruptures caused by the first phase of steam powered manufacture allowed a window of radical thought to widely circulate. Owenism with its roots in early English Jacobinism was a response to radical changes taking place in English society and it found material expression through the advocacy for the

¹⁰ John, Langdon. *Pocket Editions of the New Jerusalem: Owenite Communitarianism in Britain 1825-1855*. (Unpublished: University of Yor, DPhil, 2000) p.179.

¹¹ Kantor, Rosabeth Moss. *Commitment and Community : Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP,1972); Susan Love Brown, *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1976).

¹² Lowenthal, E. *The Ricardian Socialists* (New York: Columbia, 1911) pp.12-13.

formation of cooperative communal experimentations.¹³

Robert Owen a successful 19th Century cotton manufacturer, paternalistic employer, and advocate for far reaching changes to society seeing man as being wholly a creature of circumstances therefore new circumstances could produce an entirely different human being, he proposed that the people should reject the existing competitive system in which true happiness was impossible and all become members of self-supporting communities. The building of community experiments was at the heart of Owenism. Without which Owenite goals of abolishing the family, reforming marriage, achieving equality of the sexes, and the abolition of the distinction between mental and manual labour, and of town and country, let alone the ending of courts and prisons, war and government – would remain unfulfilled.¹⁴ All goods would be held in common, all work for the good of all, there would be no need for rewards or punishments, and a new system of production, distribution and education would level up and advance human development ending crime, and selfishness. A blend of communitarian theory, anti-capitalist economics and a science of society. At the heart of his philosophy was a utilitarian argument seeing that the happiness of the greatest number is the only legitimate object of society, and this could only be achieved through cooperation and a condemnation of a capitalist society and its creation of individualized men and women. Society needed to be radically reformed as the best means to do this was via experimental communities.¹⁵

William Hodson, former sailor, Methodist lay minister and landowner served as a

¹³ J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen And The Owenites In America – The Quest for the New Moral World* (1994, Vermont, Gregg Revivals), p.74.

¹⁴ Krishan Kumar, "Utopian Thought and Communal Practice: Robert Owen and the Owenite Communities." *Theory and Society* 19.1 (1990): 1-35.

¹⁵ J. F. C. Harrison, 1994,p.47.

representative for Upwell on the Wisbech Board of Guardians, standing for his fourth term in March 1838, and was connected with James Hill, a Wisbech banker and proprietor of the radical newspaper, the *Star in the East*. He encountered Robert Owen while chairing a meeting in the town of March in July 1838 as part of Owen's lecture tour of eastern England and wrote to Owen on 15th August to outline a scheme for a cooperative community.¹⁶ The letter was accompanied with a pamphlet entitled *Each for All – To the Working Classes, the Real Producers of Wealth*, proposing the building of a community in which 'None will spoil their hat in bowing to superiors, all will be equal.'¹⁷ Hodson's venture at Manea Fen did not gain the full support of the formal Owenite movement -The Association of All Classes of All Nations. In part due to internal tensions owing to the lack of progress in establishing community ventures which created a space for interest directed towards 'unofficial' communities, such as that at Manea Fen. The colony was quickly established in late 1838 on 200 acres of flat, windswept, wet but fertile land bordering on the Old Bedford River.

¹⁶ Typescript notes on the colony. Wisbech and Fenland Museum.

¹⁷ ROC.68.1. Hodson to Owen, 15th August 1838. National Co-operative Archive,

2. New Lives, New Landscapes

This chapter considers what Aldous Huxley called, ‘the most difficult and most important of all the arts – the arts of living together and with benefit for all concerned.’¹⁸ The act of communal living represents a major social experiment one which often runs counter to the dominant culture and where human behaviour, motivation, and interpersonal relations are put to the test. While ideology underlies all human behaviour, the tenets of alternative or intentional communities were far more consciously focused than those of the dominant culture. This chapter considers the colony’s built environment, its daily practices, dress, and the rules the colonists lived by, and seeks to read them in Blake’s ‘Infernal’ sense: that is, held upside-down and shaken; until they reveal what its authors took for granted.¹⁹ By drawing on the colony’s own self-published newspaper, and the scepticism of outsiders alongside what fragmentary evidence of the colony’s material culture remains.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological perspective* puts forward a rigorous sociological methodology for approaching the historical phenomena of utopian communal experimentations by examining the mechanisms that contributed to community longevity. She analyses communes in sociological terms adopting the idea of commitment mechanisms

¹⁸ Aldous Huxley, *Adonis and the Alphabet, and Other essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1956), p.100.

¹⁹ E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory or on Orrery of Errors* (London, Merlin Press, 1978), pp.36-37.

which possess two distinct elements, detachment from outside society and attachment to the commune. Kantor puts forward three types of commitment: instrumental commitment, which supports group continuance; affective commitment, which supports group cohesion and evaluate or moral commitment, which supports social control. One drawback to Kantor's work is her insistence on evaluating community success and failure through the prism of longevity.²⁰ Dolores Hayden's work *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* looks to see how ideology shapes the built environment connecting community design with symbolic representations and social dynamics. Her work is uneven and lacks historical context for the utopias she discusses, but this criticism doesn't detract from the questions she poses. Love Brown's work *Intentional Communities: An Anthropological Perspective* has led to the adoption of the concept of intentional communities as framework for thinking about such colony experimentations. Her work takes an anthropological approach to re-think social science theories in relation to lived utopias particularly in the American context. She identifies intentional communities as those consciously formed with a specific purpose in mind. The intentional community is one whose origins are often shaped by extreme stress caused by radical change in the social and cultural environment. Love Brown sees them, as she puts it, as 'voting with their feet' – a call to action that is personal and communal bring people together to meet certain needs, wants and desires and in doing so connecting people in a particular fashion. Conceptually, socially, and physically, they are set apart from normal society with its structures and statutes and

²⁰ Kantor, Rosabeth Moss. *Commitment and Community : Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1972).

roles. Sometimes the community is geographically isolated.²¹

Utopian Socialist colony schemes arose out of a response to economic and social upheaval. Hodson found willing recruits from both within the Owenite movement and those working-class men and women from the north-west of England facing distressing and precarity as the Secretary of Bolton branch of the Rational Society recognised ‘that many shall be induced to leave their homes to join in his [William Hodson] experiment’.²² Those who took on the challenge of living communally adopted new modes of living that deviated from the wider society and were built upon social and political ideologies that captured the ideals of the political moment.²³ Owenism, embraced rural virtue; agrarianism becomes a means of creating community, appealing increasingly to those under-pressure from ‘the deafening noise of the engine’ and this call to communality connected with a working class collectivism of friendly societies, burial clubs and its ethos of mutuality.²⁴

William Hodson’s prospectus to new recruits was nothing less than the abandonment of the cares and concerns of the old world. Manea offered an opportunity to work reasonable hours, to live a decent life where the concerns of childcare, old age, and the precarity of waged labour no longer existed. This new

²¹ Lucy Jane Kamau, ‘Liminality, communitas, charisma and community’ in *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective*, ed. by Susan Love Brown (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 19-21.

²² *New Moral World*, March 12th, 1839.

²³ Susan Love Brown, *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective*, ed. by Susan Love Brown (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp.3-5.

²⁴ J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen And The Owenites In America – The Quest for the New Moral World* (Vermont: Gregg Revivals, 1994), pp.50-58.

moral world offered peace of mind, intellectual enrichment, access to recreation and the arts.²⁵ As Hodson put it:

From this day forward, let our lives be devoted to this great cause. Let the flag of freedom be for ever unfurled; and as fast as we assist all our brothers and sisters of the human race, to plant themselves their own vines and fig-trees, under which they may sit in peace and security, none daring, nor any wishing to make another afraid.²⁶

A central means of achieving this aim was through the establishment of bordered spaces offering a means of defining the group, as Kantor argues, 'strong communities tend to have strong boundaries – physical, social and behavioural'.²⁷ Physical isolation in theory allowed the colonists to shed their old attachments and modes of life and thought - part of a process of re-education resulting in a personal and group social and cultural transformation – it was only through this process argued Hodson that 'a harmonious amalgamation of mind and feeling can be generated.'²⁸ Manea from its inception was unmistakably sectarian in character. The *Star in the East* a critic of the colony saw that, 'Mr. Hodson limits philanthropy to Manea Fen' and neglects the interests and concerns of wider society.²⁹

Kantor draws attention to the question of commitment, and the need to get the work done, and she argues that a significant commitment mechanism is through the instrumental commitment process of shared labour and shared hardships which contribute to the building of close fulfilling relationships which re-enforce share agreement and shared perception around community functioning and values.³⁰

²⁵ ROC.68.1. Hodson to Owen, 15th August 1838. National Co-operative Archive,

²⁶ *Working Bee Herald of the Hodsonian community society*, July 27th, 1839.

²⁷ Kantor, 1973, p.169.

²⁸ *Working Bee*, August 3rd, 1839.

²⁹ *Star in the East, The Truth, And Nothing But The Truth*, January 19th, 1839.

³⁰ Kantor, 1973, pp.64-65.

There is a significant draw back to this theory when tested in the context of Manea. William Hodson, and Samuel Rowbotham, the first Secretary of the colony seemed to have never considered the skills needed to transform agricultural fenland into a habitual space, alongside the work involved in the colony's enterprises of brickmaking and agricultural self-sufficiency. Hodson's rose-tinted prospectus spoke a language of the colony as an Eden in the fens in contrast to the 'filthy streets and alleys of large manufacturing towns' and in the Cambridgeshire countryside colonists would 'inspire heaven's purest oxygen, and grow our own corn on our own estate'.³¹ But the haste with which the colony was created, and lack of care in relation to choosing its members created muddle and acronym as exemplified in the working of the clay pits; work initially had been undertaken by linen drapers, weavers and others of similar occupation who had started with great enthusiasm and vigour but the arduousness of the work had led to a tipping point where their 'courage slackened as day proceeded day'.³² The first iteration of the colony was found wanting in part by their lack of ideological commitment to Owenite principles and the sheer hard physical labour needed to build and sustain a viable community. This led E. T. Craig writing to Robert Owen in July 1839 sighting Hodson's mismanagement and the subsequent ill feeling that driven him and others from the colony.³³ Hodson admitted as much saying that it was 'a folly of ever having a member until we have an occupation fitted to their previous habits'.³⁴ It is important to recognise that throughout its existence there was no stable membership.³⁵ There was a constant flow of people who came for just a few months and then moved on. The precarity of the venture can be seen in the demand for labour which could not be filled through

³¹ *Working Bee*, July 27th, 1839.

³² *Working Bee*, October 26th, 1839.

³³ ROCC1132. E. T. Craig, July 28th, 1839. Cooperative Union Archives.

³⁴ *Working Bee*, October 26th, 1839.

³⁵ *Social Pioneer, Record of the Progress of Socialism*, March 17th, 1839.

the ranks of Owenites and instead led to the employment of local people. In May 1840 three women were taken on to wash linen, these were the wives of the hired labourers working on the land.³⁶ As Hodson recognised the labour shortages meant that 'for some years we shall be compelled to have a great portion of our land cultivated by hire labourers....'³⁷ This episode demonstrates it's not enough to get the work done, but the importance of getting the right people to do the work and to remain committed to the group's overall objectives. Manea was never a hermetically sealed social space, but one open to outsiders and dependent on waged labourers whose relationship with the colonists was based on material needs rather than through an ideological commitment to the colony's wider social and cultural goals.

The colony from its reconstitution after the failures of the first iteration used the promise of membership to new candidates demanding they serve a period of time as a candidate before being admitted to the group. The new arrival had to in this way prove their worth and demonstrate the qualities necessary to obtain full membership. If they 'should any be found unfit, we shall be compelled to reject them, however painful to our and their feelings.'³⁸ The use of candidacy demonstrates both affective and evaluate commitment mechanism, attempting to build both group cohesion and asserting social control.

Equally, Hodson and the trustees used rules to shape both the recruitment process and control the activities of the candidates and members once in situ. The rule book consisted of 42 rules governing everything from the structure, organisation, voting rights of the colony to the education of children and distribution of living

³⁶ *Working Bee*, May 16th, 1840.

³⁷ *Working Bee*, July 27th, 1839.

³⁸ *Working Bee*, July 27th, 1839.

spaces. All members, holding any office or otherwise, were to enjoy equal rights, privileges, education, enjoyments, and personal freedom. The colony was governed by a president (Hodson) and a group of directors – the president had the power to dismiss a member and he was able to nominate two of the directors. The directors specified that all applicant for admittance to the colony must apply in writing, therefore limiting the number of possible candidates. Once within the colony the candidate had to abstain from drinking alcohol or swearing.³⁹ Disciplinary procedures were put in place to deal with the rulebreakers. If anyone member was ‘found not to contribute to the happiness and well-being of the community by their conduct’, a meeting of all the members would be called and a democratic vote would take place to ‘determine whether the parties continue on the books of the society’. If there was 3/4th majority in favour they would be rejected with the consent of the directors.⁴⁰ The printer John Greene was expelled by the colony due to his aggressive and abusive behaviour.⁴¹

Hodson, and his nominees deeply influenced the composition and governance of the colony, and it is difficult to take at face value the idea that the membership were all equal – when so much rested financially on Hodson’s shoulders and the board consisted in part on those who he nominated. Rule 28. States that ‘that all shall enjoy perfect liberty of conscience, and freedom in the expression of opinion’⁴² Seems to ring somewhat hollow when criticism of the venture could lead to dismissal. The rules can be seen as a means of social control, pressurizing the membership to conform, and shaping much of the day-to-day lived experience of the

³⁹ Pryme.d.590. *Rules of the Hodsonian Community Society*, Manea Fen, Cambridgeshire. Rule No.27 & 29.

⁴⁰ Rule No.26.

⁴¹ *Working Bee*, November 23rd, 1839.

⁴² Rule 28.

colonists.

The role of a uniform, form of dress speaks to a dual purpose as means of social control and insider outsider difference, members would be instantly identifiable to the group and equally differentiating themselves from the outside world. Also, the uniformity of dress speaks a visual language of unity and belonging and is part of a process of affective commitment building creating cohesion and asserting group identity and attachment to the communal project. The colonists adopted a dress code in June 1840, men were to wear green trousers and tunics, with a cap, while women wore trousers or dresses. The *Working Bee* claimed without irony that the design would not 'offend the eye, nor make the wearer an object of curiosity to every bystander'.⁴³ A visitor to the colony spoke of the men as 'somewhat like the representation of Robin Hood and his foresters.'⁴⁴ Possibly we can see this comment as speaking to a wider popular culture identifying the Hodsonian's with a group of people living transgressive lives as outlaws righting social injustices, and the colonists were consciously or sub-consciously feeding into the popular imagination through a form of costume play asserting that were part of a longer tradition of people adopting alternative forms of social organisation to right social injustices.

The working day started at 6.00am and continued to 6.00p.m. It was as George Dunne stated about 'going the right way to work out our redemption'. By, September 1840 Manea was well established with fifty residents in the colony – fifteen employed in the thrashing of oats for market, eighteen in claying the land, six working on the *Working Bee*, three gardeners, a schoolmaster, brickmakers, and the rest employed

⁴³ *Working Bee*, June 27th, 1840.

⁴⁴ *Working Bee*, June 13th, 1840.

in various domestic tasks.⁴⁵ The colony had overcome its chaotic beginning and an argument can certainly be made for within the second iteration a spirit of unity and working for a higher purpose being engendered for people like Dunne through the satisfaction provided by communal work, and he offers tentative evidence for the gaining of a form of evaluative commitment by the colonists seeing the growth of a collective identity and purpose. Dunne's interestingly uses the word 'redemption' connecting to how Owenites saw that character as being shaped by environmental factors, and the potentiality of human transformation and flourishing through the exposure of people to new environmental factors and conditions.

Community activity didn't end with the end of the working day but continued into the evenings. Education played a central role at Manea, both providing a basic level of education and to prepare people fit for the coming new moral world – the colonists were being transformed into a vanguard able to spread the message through both word and deed to the wider society of the benefits of socialism. Equally, through educative activities a community spirit was being inculcated. On Monday's the debating class; Tuesday music; Wednesday the Board met after work; Thursday mathematics; Friday the elocution class; Saturday reading and dancing and on Sunday's there was the gathering together for communal singing of social hymns accompanied by an in an improving address from William Hodson.⁴⁶ Then the members and candidates in the afternoon played cricket, bowls, fiddling and dancing, the more respectable residents of Manea regarded the colonists with reprobation, being sabbath breakers although it was not uncommon for them to visit

⁴⁵ *Working Bee*, September 26th, 1840.

⁴⁶ *Typescript notes*, Wisbech & Fenland Museum

the colony during the afternoon.⁴⁷

It was through group activity and group ritual such as working together, sharing meals, and social and educative activities involving collective participation, and the defying of social conventions such as indulging in recreational pursuits on a Sunday that a feeling of belonging was being inculcated, this was the glue that held the membership and candidates together.

The architecture of the site can be seen as being highly symbolic, and the physical layout and the building's reflect community values. Group housing and community design which were frequently used to convey principles of shared life, cooperation, and equality.⁴⁸ Robert Owen wished to utilize architecture to re-enforce social design. He sensed the power of environmental design as a force for social change.⁴⁹ Hodson adapted Owen's design ideas to meet the challenges of the fenland landscape. The colony consisted of three sides of a square or parallelogram, each formed of 24 cottages and the fourth was bounded by the river. Many of the colonies' residents lived in dormitories, especially single hired labourers, and candidates. Before the accommodation was built, the wider membership would have been housed in segregated dormitories. The cottages were intended largely for sleeping – constituting a single room. Everything else was done communally – meals prepared in the community kitchen which comprised a larder, washroom, and oven, a dining room that could accommodate fifty people. The rituals of eating together and

⁴⁷ *Typescript notes*, Wisbech & Fenland Museum.

⁴⁸ Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1976), pp.45-46.

⁴⁹ Robert, Owen, *Report to the County of Lanark : Of a Plan for Relieving Public Distress, and Removing Discontent, by Giving Permanent, Productive Employment to the Poor and Working Classes* (Glasgow: Wardlaw & Cunninghame, 1821), pp.19-20.

continuous group contact were part of a living participatory democracy. The use of space conveys ideas about social equality, any distinction of class, or statuses that kept them apart in ordinary life are swept away, and they are all united in common circumstances including diet and the use of communal spaces. But not all are equal, Hodson did not live in the community but apart from it, hinting at the difference in social status between the founder and the community and the tensions within his own household about his continued involvement in building and sustaining the venture.⁵⁰ There is some evidence of tensions arising from within the colonists due to constantly communality of living and working together, particularly the lack of privacy – ‘but should any party prefer taking their provisions at their own room, such person on giving due notice to the proper authorities; shall be allowed so to do ...’⁵¹ Equally, the children were to be educated separately from the family unit and also from the local population – the colony spoke of building an enclosure so as the children will be ‘kept free from the influence of the old world’.⁵²

What was built must be of significance, and landmarks can be seen as steering points serving as orientations for navigation. Manea consciously spoke a symbolic language about the moral development of humanity through its designs. The very boundary functions as a means to identify territory in the colonists’ own minds – the act of crossing a boundary – serving to promote the feeling and cementing group identity. They demarcate not just physical space, but us from not us.⁵³ The colony built an observation platform on two levels where forty people could take tea which flew a tricolour above the union flag – ‘indicative of conquered tyranny cowering

⁵⁰ *The New Moral World*, January 9th, 1840.

⁵¹ *Rules of the Hodsonian Community Society*, Manea Fen, Cambridgeshire.1840.

⁵² *Working Bee*, July 27th, 1839.

⁵³ Ernest J. Green, "The Social Functions of Utopian Architecture." *Utopian Studies* 4.1 (1993), pp.4-5.

below it'.⁵⁴ The positioning of the flags themselves communicating the ideological commitment to equality and liberty and a marker of Owenism roots in early English Jacobinism. The very building of it as a means of creating group unity, part of an instrumental commitment process seeing the undertaking of a collective act to install pride and accomplishment in the membership and candidates.⁵⁵ The platform allowed visitors and colonists to physically look out on their bordered, bounded space – giving a sense of geographical unity. Defining the insider, outsider relationship and emphasising that the colony as a beacon of enlightened thought and activity in contrast to the old corrupt world. Samuel Rowbotham writing in the *Working Bee* in April 1840 declared:

We have this day hoisted upon the colony a large flag ... to give all parties who may be coming to visit us an opportunity of easily descrying our locality ... owing to place being so extensive and thinly populated. Any friend, therefore, that may be, during the forthcoming summer season, desirous of paying us a visit, can look out for the flag at a considerable distance (several miles), to whom it will serve as a beacon⁵⁶

This evidence supports Yaacov Oved argument that socialist communes needed to de-emphasize boundaries to influence the outside world.⁵⁷ Manea became something of a tourist attraction both for local people and the wider Owenite movement. Its popularity meant they ended up employing a tour guide and they had to charge a small fee for tea due the numbers who visited them.⁵⁸

In conclusion we can see the complexity in forging an intentional community and from its inception Manea struggled to understand the limits of good intentions and

⁵⁴ *Working Bee*, 10th August 1839.

⁵⁵ Hayden, 1976, p.371.

⁵⁶ *Working Bee*, April 7th, 1839.

⁵⁷ Green, Ernest J. 1993, p.6.

⁵⁸ *Working Bee*, April 4th, 1840.

high ideals in deliberately building a project that was sustainable. Brown speaks of voting with their feet, and this highlights the drive, the idealism of intentional community builders to take an abstract set of ideas and turn them into a concrete reality. William Hodson recognised the distress he saw around him and in Robert Owen's social system he saw a means of transforming the material conditions of the working-class. The haste of its conception and execution draws attention to the need to find members able to adapt themselves not only to communal life and the ideology of Owenism but also to the arduousness of the work needed to accomplish its daily operations. Kantor's sociological framework of commitment draws attention to how the colony over time evolved a series of commitment mechanisms to inculcate group unity and a shared sense of belonging – whether that be dress, speaking both a visual language of difference, and a rejection of the external world, and equally a sign of self-confidence. The adoption of rules which can be seen in part a form of social control and a means of bringing order to what started out as a dysfunctional attempt at living communally. The daily routine of communal activities whether through work or leisure, allied to communal dining and also communal sleeping for their prospective members was a means of building a 'we' feeling, and instigating a process of shedding their own individual identities and seeing themselves as part of a collective. But the sources hint at tensions due to this constant communality and the lack of privacy.

Design plays a crucial part inculcating a sense of belonging and being apart from what the Hodsonian's considered a corrupt old world. The buildings were designed to enhance communal living and were a physical expression of the colony's commitment to socialist collectivism rejecting all forms of private ownership and

personal autonomy – the private and public merging in spaces where leisure and dining could take place communally. Sleeping in dormitories or couples inhabiting spartan accommodation encouraging that sense of group identity over the individual and the family. The very sparsely populated landscape and physical structures the colony erected can be read in symbolic terms as creating a liminal space where a process of re-education in the ways of Owenism and alternative living could take place and a means to identify territory in the colonists' own minds – the act of crossing a boundary – serving to promote and cement group belonging. The platform with the flags a beacon of reason in a world of ignorance asserting the insider and outsidersness of them and us. A point of contradiction is the need for seclusion and detachment to further their aims, but also to be open enough to be a model for those to emulate. Manea ultimately illustrates both the successes and failures of building an alternative social system and the complexity of the art of living together, recognising that the examined life is a process, always unfinished and always unstable.

3. The Manea Colony and the Limits of Sexual Radicalism

The Hodsonian Community Society left a limited range of sources ranging from newspaper articles, correspondence, and their own colonists self-published newspaper to provide evidence for how Owenism challenged prevailing gender ideologies, roles, and identities in early nineteenth-century England. Each intentional community such as Manea embodied some critique of the dominant societies culture and ideology. This chapter considers whether the ideological rhetoric around gender equality was ever matched in the colonies day-to-day practices. It moves onto discuss a single episode in the colonies lifecycle arguing that Owenite ideas about marriage and sexual equality challenged the dominant culture leading to the disruption and re-constitution of the colony's first iteration.

Carol A. Kolmerten *Women in Utopia : The Ideology of Gender in the American Owenite Communities* work suggested that utopias were essentially male conceptions, blind to the realities of women's lives and incapable of fulfilling their promises of gender equality. Owenite men told women they were "equal" but made no attempt to shoulder their burdens. Indeed, married women faced the double bind as working for the community was added to work, they performed for their families. Women lacked agency and personal autonomy becoming involved in community life because they had little choice other than to follow their husbands.⁵⁹ Langdon is

⁵⁹ Carol A. Kolmerten. *Women in Utopia : The Ideology of Gender in the American Owenite*

deeply influenced by Kolmerten's approach arguing Manea was not a revolutionary break from the prevailing highly gendered culture of early 19th Century England and the promise of sexual equality as agitated for by the colony never lived up to the reality of community life.⁶⁰ In contrast, Barbara Taylor's work, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, looks to see how early socialism critiqued the role of women, marriage and the family in the opening decades of the nineteenth-century and how socialist feminist arguments grew in the fertile soil of Owenism in the 1830s and 1840s. Taylor argues that at the heart of Owenism was a critique of marriage, and the family and the relations of subordination and domination of men and women. Owenite's answer was to create a society of 'perfect equality and perfect freedom' via the creation of intentional communities freeing women from the oppression of marriage, personal dependence and breaking the ties of kinship from the nucleated family unit.⁶¹ For Taylor, Manea represents some of the 'most militant feminist statements ever to be voiced [within the Owenite movement]'.⁶² This chapter contests Langdon and Kolmerten's reading particularly when considering the re-constituting of the first iteration of Manea which Langdon argues was largely shaped by material concerns and that questions of sexual freedom, rational marriage, sexual equality were peripheral issues.⁶³ Langdon and Kolmerten fail to recognize that to build an alternative to the mainstream is an act of defiance and criticism of the prevailing culture in itself. Even though many communities including Manea failed in practice to overturn the normative 'common sense' ideologies assigned to the roles of women in a highly patriarchal society, women in the colony always possessed agency and

Communities (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990).

⁶⁰ Langdon, John, *Pocket Editions of the New Jerusalem: Owenite Communitarianism in Britain 1825-1855* (Unpublished: University of York, DPhil, 2000), p.257.

⁶¹ Taylor, Barbara *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism ad Feminism in the nineteenth century* (London: Virago, 1983), p.xi.

⁶² Taylor, Barbara, 1983, p.257.

⁶³ John Langdon. "A Monument of Union." *Utopian Studies* 23.2 (2012), p.516.

Manea allowed women to express in a public space heterodox ideas about sexual equality which set them apart not only from the dominant culture but also from within mainstream Owenism itself.

The Owenite movement of the 1820s and 1830s represented a minority view within English radicalism seeing themselves as an iconoclastic vanguard expressing views on marriage, family, sexual equality and sexual difference which often sharply contradicted prevailing orthodoxies.⁶⁴ At the heart of Owenism was the belief that human character was shaped more by environment than heredity. This belief meant that changing the social environment could change social inequities, including gender inequalities. Owen echoing Wollstonecraft spoke of 'a new state of existence [where] men and women will be equally well educated ... will have the same rights and privileges ...'.⁶⁵ His views did conform to prevailing social and cultural norms seeing women as possessing some innate domesticity in contrast to men.⁶⁶ He most fundamentally diverges from the dominant culture was in his rejection of the idea of the fundamental centrality of the nuclear family to early Victorian society, arguing that it was 'the main bastion of private property and the guardian of all these qualities of individualism and self-interest to which he was opposed.'⁶⁷ The only proper way to achieve a radical transformation of the institution of the family and the subordination of women to men was through the development of intentional community.

Manea reveals the complexities and contradictions of communal living for women

⁶⁴ Taylor, Barbara, 1983 pp.x-xi.

⁶⁵ Robert Owen, *Opening Speech and his Reply to the Rev. Alex Campbell* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati University Press, 1829), p.124.

⁶⁶ Kolmerten, 1990, p.19.

⁶⁷ J. F. Harrison 'A New View of Mr. Owen' in *Robert Owen, Prophet of the Poor : Essays in Honour of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of His Birth*, ed. by Sidney Pollard and John Salt (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 8-9.

– for the colony was attempting to raise women to the equality of men in a deeply gendered patriarchal society. Manea offers evidence to support Kolmerten’s argument for the deeds not matching the rhetoric for the colony never redrew the boundaries or contested traditional gender divisions of labour, it assumed the rightness of the dominant cultures’ attitudes seeing women as nurturing and maternal, and William Hodson set the tone speaking a language of patriarchal paternalism seeing himself as rescuing women from the corruption of the old moral world.⁶⁸

The colony enshrined in its rules ‘That all the members, male and female, holding any office or otherwise shall engage equal rights, privileges, education, enjoyment, and personal freedom’.⁶⁹ To achieve these goals was through the enlightenment belief in the radical transformation power of education for both men and women.

Cincinnati writing in the *Working Bee* states:

Even long neglected woman is in a state of progress, ‘the light of reason’ is fast breaking over women’s mental horizon; many of her sex have ascertained that she is our equal; that she is as necessary to fill up the great chain of cause and effect, as you are.⁷⁰

Kolmerten’s argument is on shakier foundations when considering how from the outset Manea women were seen as the cornerstone of the venture for it was the role of women to nurture a new kind of person fit for a new moral world.⁷¹ They may have conformed to prevailing gender stereotypes, in assuming the roles of carers and nurturers, but women at Manea would oversee the removal of children from their parent’s orbit of control, living together overseen by Mrs. Cutting, and as the *Working*

⁶⁸ Pryme.d.590. *Rule 16 of the Hodsonian Community Society*.

⁶⁹ *Working Bee, The Herald of the Hodsonian Community Society*, July 27th, 1839.

⁷⁰ *Working Bee*, August 31st, 1839.

⁷¹ *The Social Pioneer, Record of the Progress of Socialism*, April 6th, 1839.

Bee stated it was women's 'special field of labour' to raise these new rational citizens.⁷² The intentional community becomes a site which could offer gender equality and each succeeding generation growing up in this cooperative atmosphere would improve on the next, leading to a position where societal norms had been radically re-imagined. At Manea the nuclear family would fade away replaced with this entirely new system of living, childcare becomes a collectivist act undertaken by different groups of women and separate from parental influence.⁷³ Women at Manea though operating within a highly gendered culture operated a domain where they were crucial agents in shaping the future of the Owenite new moral world and the socialist citizen.

Owenism advocated cooperative housekeeping to free women from the enslavement of the private home. The social missionary, George Holyoake like many Owenites recognised the arduousness of women's labour in the home and outside of it, seeing the domestic ideology promoted by middle-class reformers as being unattainable for poorer working-class women :

Do not believe a word about the reserve and ease of 'women's duties', and the romantic luxuries of 'women's sphere'! ... Women are addressed as angels before marriage and are made drudges afterwards.⁷⁴

The colony adopted cooperative housekeeping and the staffing of the departments reflect prevailing gender biases with women undertaking on all the 'domestic' role[s]'.⁷⁵ Significantly though the trustees devolved power to the colony's' women

⁷² *Working Bee*, July 20th, 1839.

⁷³ Taylor, 1983, pp.52-56.

⁷⁴ Peter Gurney, 'George Jacob Holyoake: Socialism, Association, And Co-Operation in Nineteenth Century England', in *New Views Of Co-Operation*, ed. by Stephen Yeo (London, Routledge, 1988), p.57.

⁷⁵ *Working Bee*, November 16th, 1839.

allowing them to organise their own routines and job allocations. As the *Working Bee* commented:

During the past week, the female members have arranged amongst themselves their various offices and dates ... That three women be engaged to wash the linen. It is found to be the most convenient and serviceable plan to obtain the services if the wives of the hired labourers, as the Communions can employed more profitably elsewhere.⁷⁶

In theory the role of cooperative housekeeping offered economies of scale allowing for the collaboration of a smaller group of women to undertake domestic tasks creating a surplus of labour. Communal housekeeping at Manea though does reveal a tension however between the expectations and realities of women's experiences outside of the colony, William Hodson expressed his frustration at the unsuitability of some of the women who were part of the first iteration – 'they had not come to work, as their husbands could maintain them in the old world, and they do no more here than there'.⁷⁷ The promise of communal living far from reducing the burden on women, in fact increased it for some, and Hodson met resistance rather than acquiescence. Here is evidence to contradict Kolmerten's argument that women lacked agency for these women were not mere syphers of their spouses but actively resistance and more than able and willing to assert and disrupt the adoption of communal work practices.

Owen's views on traditional marriage were revolutionary and incendiary seeing him argue that the institution reduced women to objects, subject to the control of their husband's encouraging selfishness and individuality. During this period women had few rights. They were often denied an education. On marriage their separate legal existence was ended, their money passed to their husband. To all intents and

⁷⁶ *Working Bee*, May 16th, 1840.

⁷⁷ *Working Bee*, July 4th, 1840.

purposes, they became the property of their spouses and could be legally subject to domestic violence.⁷⁸ Owen formulated the idea of rational marriage, where unhappy couples at any point in their married lives were able to divorce – women’s voices would no longer be tied by laws and custom and practice to lives of unhappiness, neglect and abuse. He spoke of sexuality as a ‘natural force ... beyond the control of human will’ and attacked ‘compulsory monogamy’.⁷⁹ He was giving voice to practices which were already present in many working-class communities where middle-class ideas of what constituted respectability never became a central tenet of working-class home lives.⁸⁰ Cohabitation, self-marriage and divorce were common for many working-class men and women who were indifferent to the moral aspects of marriage as articulated by church and state. Importantly they did not seek to draw attention to these arrangements, and never sought to publicly flaunt them as a radical stance, instead they were makeshifts, meeting the contingent needs of couples and families.⁸¹ As Taylor notes, ‘maternal responsibilities and sexual division of labour, rather than the marriage institution, were primary determinants of domestic power relations.’⁸²

The Colony embraced Owenite radicalism, and in their articles of society concretely state their Owenite credentials:

That, as far as circumstance will allow, the whole of the rational system of society, as propounded by Robert Owen, of New Lanark, shall be adopted ... That all shall enjoy perfect liberty of conscience, and freedom in the expression of opinion.

⁷⁸ Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood. "A Feminist Theoretical Approach to the Historical Archaeology of Utopian Communities." *Historical Archaeology* 40.1 (2006), p.154.

⁷⁹ Taylor, 1983, pp.41-45, p.199.

⁸⁰ Ginger S. Frost, "As If She Was My Own Child": Cohabitation, Community, and the English Criminal Courts, 1855-1900." *The History of the Family* 20.4 (2015), p.547.

⁸¹ Ginger S. Frost, *Living in Sin: Cohabiting as Husband and Wife in Nineteenth-century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p.177.

⁸² Taylor, 1983, p.196.

The articles of the society explicitly make clear:

That all the members male and female, holding any office or otherwise shall enjoy equal rights, privileges, education, enjoyment and personal freedom.⁸³

William Hodson decried the role of marriage as nothing less than legalised prostitution forcing women to be subordinate to the wishes of men and prisoners of their material needs.⁸⁴ His own life experience had undoubtedly shaped his views living with his dead wife's sister which had led him to be no respecter of the marriage laws of England. He was drawing on arguments developed by Owenite activists like William Thompson who throughout the 1820s denounced masculine tyranny and compared women to slaves attacking their marital unhappiness.⁸⁵

In late March 1839, William Hodson called a meeting of the Colony and proposed 'to have none who are fully prepared to carry out the whole of Mr. Owen's system as fast as possible, compatible with the good of all ...'.⁸⁶

Samuel Rowbotham, Secretary to the Colony wrote 'This week we have held a meeting, and in consequence several are leaving ... We are determined to have no more nor indeed any remaining "Half Bred" Socialists.'⁸⁷ The reason for leaving Hodson would later spin in the pages of *The Working Bee* was due to the unsuitability of the candidates, who were drunkards, frequenters of brothels, and

⁸³ Article XIX, and XVI, *The Social Pioneer*, The Progress of Socialism, March 1839; *Working Bee*, the *Herald of the Hodsonian Community Society*, November 3rd, 1839.

⁸⁴ *Working Bee*, July 27th, 1839.

⁸⁵ Barbara Taylor, 1983, pp. 32 – 44.

⁸⁶ *The Social Pioneer*, April 13th, 1839.

⁸⁷ *The Social Pioneer*, April 13th, 1839.

work shy, or in the case of some of the women unsuited to heavy labour, and wedded to religious dogma's out of keeping with rational principles.⁸⁸

But in a private letter to a female friend in Manchester, published in *The Social Pioneer*, Hodson explained what had really happened and he didn't just want to reform marriage but to abandon it all together:

We have had a revolution in our community already. This arose from my calling a meeting of the members, stating the objects I had on view viz., the abolition of private property, more particularly the traffic human flesh, and the buying and selling of each other. I told them that those who wishes to be tied together could be. But were they prepared to see each other act rationally – that is, were prepared to cherish a mother and child provided there was no legal husband? The answer was – No. Upon my declaring that I could not convey the property on any *other* condition than that all should enjoy personal freedom. This has caused a succession from our body⁸⁹

Mr. Woofenden, reporting to the East London, Branch No.1 on the 7th April on these extraordinary events stated in his opinion:

it was the intention of the colonists, to dispense with the present matrimonial engagements, in the fullest extent of the world; that it was stated in the colony, that when society became rational, there would be no such thing as either marrying, or giving in marriage; also, that the principle the colonists intended to adopt, was worse than the present marriage system of the old world ... [they] were impressing on the minds of the young single men that the union of affection was evil and the indiscriminate connection of the sexes the true principle.⁹⁰

All the married couples were leaving and Hodson was actively recruiting young

⁸⁸ *The Working Bee*, August 3rd, 1839.

⁸⁹ *The Social Pioneer*, April 27th, 1839.

⁹⁰ *The Social Pioneer*, April 13th, 1839.

single women.⁹¹

The second iteration of the colony's membership far from tempering or diluting Hodson's arguments for sexual freedom unconstrained by Christian morality and the institution of marriage instead continued their provocations not only arguing for the equality of the sexes and equal rights for women, but as Alice writing in *The Working Bee* argues:

Why should sexual connexions be more fettered than hunger or thirst? Mr Owen has often said we cannot pledge to love for twenty-four hours. If we cannot love as we like, why attempt to bind parties together who do not mutually love? Oh Socialists! Socialists! Many of you have little room to smile at the inconsistency of the Christian. If you possess principles, why not behave, at least, kindly to those who have the moral courage to carry them into practice? I blame you not for your intemperate language; but pity the vicious feelings which have been given you. A time is fast approaching when this important subject must be fairly met. The social leaders cannot much longer shirk the question ... woman, abused, ill-treated woman must ere long be placed upon an equality with man, and love of the most disinterested nature be experienced by both sexes.⁹²

Alice is not only openly expressing a language of sexual radicalism and speaking about sexual politics in a period where political discourse came to mean for working-class women one shaped by the family and women as helpmates to men, but also expressing views beyond the narrow confines of what was regarded as respectable to speak of in print.⁹³ She rhetorically evokes a society shaped by free love in which there would be marital affection and sexual freedom challenging the nature and the stability of the family and the identity of women as wives and

⁹¹ *The Social Pioneer*, April 13th, 1839 & *The Working Bee* April 27th, 1839. Adverts were placed in the *Social Pioneer* states '... several young females are wanted, single, and imbued with the principles of Robert Owen' to undertake various duties ...'. There is corroboration from the Central Committee in Manchester who have a letter from Hodson to a Miss. D about coming to the Colony, which was published in *The Social Pioneer*, April 27th, 1839.

⁹² *Working Bee*, September 14th, 1839.

⁹³ Clark, Anna. *The Struggle for the Breeches Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), p.161.

mothers. Her anonymity is understandable during a period time when the 'public woman' was a notion often associated with prostitutes, and so to speak about sexual relationships in print outside of the prescribed language and conventional of the dominant culture was shocking to all classes as female chastity was considered a precious virtue and in the words of one man 'it is marriage alone which makes woman honoured and honourable'.⁹⁴

The rupture caused by William Hodson's advocacy of rational principles exposes a central tension at the heart of Owenism which increasingly became centred not on social and cultural questions but in questions directed towards the issue of representation and of the economy. Yeo has argued Manchester with its growing working-class membership rather than the person of Robert Owen would chart the direction which Owenism would follow.⁹⁵ The Manchester Owenite's in rejecting the Hodsonian's activities could argue they were reflecting the communities they represented:

we hold ourselves responsible to the Social body whose views we represent, ... we hold that body individually and collectively responsible to public opinion, as conveyed to us through the channels to which we have access ...'.⁹⁶

This change in the composition of Owenism, from its original base of skilled artisans, in a culture of the workshop and the tavern supplemented by a radical English Jacobinism associated with figures such as Shelley and Godwin to a working-class constituency facing the forces of industrialisation and precarity would

⁹⁴ Taylor, 1983, p.186.

⁹⁵ Eileen Yeo, 'Robert Owen and Radical Culture' in *Robert Owen, Prophet of the Poor : Essays in Honour of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of His Birth*, ed. by Sidney Pollard and John Salt (London: Macmillan, 1971), p.89

⁹⁶ *The Social Pioneer*, April 27th, 1839.

inevitably reflect their own stock of attitudes and concerns differing from a middle-class radical intelligentsia of the 1820s. The colonists began to see that many fellow Owenite socialists were not preoccupied with questions of equality and sexual liberation, but one's reduced to 'mere bread and cheese question[s]'.⁹⁷

The reception to Hodson's views is telling as one Manchester social missionary writing to *The Working Bee* put it:

The feeling here is still strong against you, particularly on the marriage question. I do not myself agree with you in thinking we can in short, do away with present unjust marriage-laws.⁹⁸

The Social Pioneer which had from its beginnings sought to convey news of 'the practical proceedings from Cambridgeshire' in a positive light and to encourage support for their endeavour saw Hodson having 'acted in such manner as to forfeit the esteem and confidence of the Social body ...'. The Manchester Central Committee in the same issue commenting on the contents of the letter from Mrs. M. saw in Hodson's conduct nothing short of 'treachery' and the letter contained 'the immorality of which savages would reject with scorn'.⁹⁹

The Manea Colony had as T. E. Craig the former editor of the Lancashire Co-operator observed may have roughly handled Owen's ideas in the heat of debate but putting aside these 'injudicious remarks' the resolutions adopted were in 'accordance with the views of Mr. Owen'.¹⁰⁰ Manea was swimming against the current of mainstream Owenism in relation to marriage reform and sexual equality – their

⁹⁷ *The Working Bee*, November 16th, 1839.

⁹⁸ *Working Bee*, Saturday August 10th, 1839.

⁹⁹ *The Social Pioneer*, April 27th, 1839.

¹⁰⁰ *The Social Pioneer*, April 20th, 1839.

ambitions were not even simply part of a utopian vision of the future, in fact they were beyond the imaginaries of organised English radicalism in working-class communities that would increasingly focused their energies on material questions than questions concerning sexual equality and sexual libertarianism.

This chapter in conclusion shows the Manea colony was a complex web of beliefs and practices. The articulation of an egalitarian gender ideology on the one hand offered improvement to women's status, particularly through educational opportunities while upholding the belief in clearly delineated gender roles. The colony allowed women to participate in society as active citizens rather than as mere subjects, but it also offers contradictory evidence that communal domestic practices far from freeing women from the drudgery of daily life was resisted and not embraced by all the women at Manea. Equally, Langdon's argument that Manea represents a continuation of the dominant culture's patriarchal attitudes, and their rhetoric was never matched in practice is only partially borne out by the evidence. That the collapse of the first iteration, far from being shaped purely by material concerns was in fact centred on the unwillingness of a significant number of colonists to live according Owenite principles about marriage and sexual equality. The role of the family and the institution of marriage are fundamental to an understanding of Owenism and this single episode illuminates how difficult it was to attempt to 'construct a new sexual culture in a society riven with sex and class-based conflicts'.¹⁰¹ Owenite ideas can be seen in part to resonate with the lived experience of working class women where co-habitation was not uncommon and sexual attitudes were more pragmatic and flexible in the opening decades of the 19th

¹⁰¹ Taylor, 1983, p.xi.

Century. But where public adoption of radical stances relating to the question of marriage was always a minority position.¹⁰² The second iteration of the colony was a radical break from the dominant culture, in speaking to marital unhappiness and the burdens faced by women. The colony allowed women to speak freely and take advantage of a public platform in the shape of the *Working bee* giving voice to a revolutionary language of free love and asserting their right to be seen as subjects rather than voiceless subordinate objects of men.

¹⁰² Taylor, 1983, pp.184-198.

4. The Hodsonian's in print, and a radical local counter-public.

Print is central to this study, and this chapter draws on documentary sources from within the Manea colony, namely their own self-published newspaper the *Working Bee*, alongside local and national newspapers relating to the colony, and its founder William Hodson. It firstly, defines the concept of 'radicalism', and then discusses the origins and debates around the idea of the 'counter-public'. Secondly, it considers the reasons for, and content of the colony's own self-published newspaper, and then turns to considers the role of radical dining and public speaking in promoting Owenite socialism, and lastly considers the vibrancy of a radical local counter-public.

The term, 'radical/radicalism' this study defines as a relative process that consists of individuals and groups challenging existing political, social, religious, or cultural norms. It represents a minority position, and oppositional to a majority position which defends the status quo and rejects the need for change.¹⁰³

The idea of the 'counter-public' emerges out of debates and arguments made in relation to Jurgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere which he set out in his work *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, where he offered this definition:

¹⁰³ A. Hessayon, 'Reappraising early modern radicals and radicalisms', in A. Hessayon and D. Finnegan (eds), *Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism in Context* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011) pp. 6–7.

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent.¹⁰⁴

Eley, and Fraser highlighted the limitations of Habermas's theory with its concentration on the bourgeoisie arguing for a broadening and opening up of his framework to include social and political movements he originally neglected –

the positive values of the liberal public sphere quickly acquired broader democratic resonance, with the resulting emergence of impressive popular movements, each with its own distinctive movement cultures ... there is enough evidence from literature of Owenism, Chartism and British popular politics ... to take this argument seriously.¹⁰⁵

Fraser, observed that the exclusionary nature of the liberal public sphere saw the development of 'alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech.'¹⁰⁶ Eagleton argues :

For what is emerging in the England of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, in that whole epoch of the intensive class struggle charted by E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, is already nothing less than a 'counter-public sphere'. In the Corresponding Societies, the radical press, Owenism, Cobbett's *Political Register* and Paine's *Right of Man*, feminism and the dissenting churches, a whole oppositional network of journals, clubs, pamphlets, debates and institutions invades the dominant consensus, threatening to fragment it from within.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. trans by. Thomas Bürger and Larry Kert (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992), p.27.

¹⁰⁵ Geoff Eley, 'Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth-Century', in, *Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth-Century*, ed. by Nicholas B. Dirks; Geoff Eley; Sherry B Ortner (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021), p.304.

¹⁰⁶ Nancy Fraser 'Re-thinking the Public Sphere' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. by Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.116.

¹⁰⁷ Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism, From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984), p.36.

Further evidence for the existence of a radical counter-public can be seen in the development of a distinctive vibrant culture of reading, whether it be in the pub, the coffee house, or reading room alongside discussion groups, local clubs and other social spaces; it is evident in the cultural politics of Chartist and Owenite branch life, with its travelling lecturer and ‘missionary’ circuits accompanying its own distinctive press.¹⁰⁸

People in the past are not exclusively linked to the past by the historical association of the material culture in which they live. They also inherit intellectual and moral patterns of belief, certain kinds of cultural and political understandings which are not easy to discern but which possess a dogged power of their own.¹⁰⁹ The cultural practices surrounding reading, genres of writing, and the very activity of reading itself have become part of a growing field of historical inquiry concerned with working-class social and cultural practices surrounding the acquisition of this skill. David Vincent’s analysis of English popular culture, argues that conventional distinctions between the printed and the spoken word were not borne out in the experience of the working poor; ‘the literate and non-literate’ had long formed,

a complex series of conflicting and mutually enforcing relationships, [so that] when the transformation in the availability and exploitation of print took place in the early nineteenth century, it was seen as an extension of indigenous working – class habits and tastes, rather than as an importation, or imposition.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Richard Johnson, ‘Really Useful Knowledge’ in *Working-class Culture: Studies in History and Theory*, ed. by John Clarke, Chas Cricher, Richard Johnson (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1979), p.80.

¹⁰⁹ Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives* (London: Verso, 1983), p.13.

¹¹⁰ David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture 1750 – 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.103.

John Stephenson has argued that rural labourers lagged a generation or more behind their urban counterparts in their forms of protest due to illiteracy and less frequent exposure to the world of pamphlets and newspapers – the constraints of localism.¹¹¹ Manea and the *Working Bee* offer us evidence to contradict this argument. The colonists actively sort to teach their labourers to read and write.¹¹² Social and political transformation through education was at the heart of Owenism It was as one Owenite printer claimed, ‘the steam engine of the moral world.’¹¹³ *The Working Bee* connected the urban and rural working classes from the agricultural labourer in Manea and Christchurch to the carpenter and bricklayer from Warrington. The colony at Manea offers suggestive evidence that the anonymous Fen village labourer were able to traverse a culture of orality and one of print. Ian Dyck draws attention to groups of working people as far removed as possible from the caricature of ‘hodge’ - as one Suffolk labourer put it, ‘[They] worked for their daily living – men of genius who are seen on rare occasions among the poor, who are in small ways lions amongst their fellows.’¹¹⁴ It was these autodidacts who were at the heart of Owenism, and it is not hard to imagine how socialist ideas could become incendiary in the hands of working-class men and women in small rural communities.

The Working Bee and herald of the Hodsonian community society was a weekly paper priced at one penny and ran between July 1839 and December 1840 it was originally printed by John Green a former social missionary, author, and member of the Colony for the trustees of Hodsonian Community Society and published by Henry

¹¹¹ John Stephenson, *Popular Disturbances in England 170-1870* (London, 1979), p.243.

¹¹² *The Working Bee, The herald of the Hodsonian community society* July 27th, 1839.

¹¹³ Harrison, John F. C. “‘The Steam Engine of the New Moral World’: Owenism and Education, 1817-1829.’ *The Journal of British Studies* 6.2 (1967), p.77.

¹¹⁴ Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.86.

Hetherington in London and 'sold by all respectable Newsvendors throughout the country.'¹¹⁵ On average it comprised eight quarto pages with a readership which numbered some 5,000 by October 1840.¹¹⁶ The paper was not in a conventional sense a vehicle for national, international or even local news, and was never dependent on sales or advertising for revenue. Primarily it was a tool for propagandizing the good news of the coming of the new moral world established at Manea and a means to refute criticism of the project from within the Owenite movement. The specifically ideological nature of intentional communities amplifies this potential for written records to reflect community biases. The historian must therefore be ever cautious at taking at face value statements made from Manea colony. The failure of the first iteration and the continued unwillingness of the official Owenite organisation to support Manea led to the paper's creation. As, *The Working Bee* stated, its purpose was:

to defend the community, report its proceedings, and form a medium of communications between the Society and the People' ... [it was to be] devoted to the best interests of the Industrious Classes ... 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.¹¹⁷

The August the 3rd editorial spoke of renouncing 'the old world' as 'false, hollow, and rotten ... in error alike in religion, its morals, economies and politics ... All amongst us is ours. No mine or there is our community, but universal commonality of

¹¹⁵ *The Working Bee*, July 20th, 1839.

¹¹⁶ *The Working Bee*, October 10th, 1840.

¹¹⁷ *The Working Bee*, August 3rd, 1839.

interests is felt and expressed throughout our establishment¹¹⁸ *The Working Bee* came to function as an alternative channel of communication for those voices' critical of the official movement, and for those unable to get a hearing in the official pages of *The New Moral World*.

The Working Bee speaks in a confident tone, there is no doubt of the rightness of their venture. It always minimized internal criticism and internal strife unless it shone a favourable light on the colonists activities.¹¹⁹ Kersten identifies a number of commonalities between utopian print culture in the United States which correspond to *The Working Bee*: Firstly, a critique of the old world; secondly, the promise – a vision of this new life; thirdly, the doctrine – explanations of the underlying principles and lastly the practice – how to build a functioning colony.¹²⁰ The propaganda was presented in a popular idiom of essays, poems, songs, dialogues, columns and editorials, and items of external news which re-enforce the doctrinal positions of the colonists. Throughout all the issues there is an emphasis on education and scientific learning – columns on scientific enquiry, and agriculture feature weekly alongside a commitment to free inquiry allied to the pursuit of rational truths, republicanism and infidelism, re-enforcing its origins in the freethinking of British Jacobinism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Most of the articles authors write under assumed names and 'the cloak of anonymity often sanctioned transgressive boldness' in freethinking and republican circles – 'Alice' writing on sexual liberation and equality

¹¹⁸ *The Working Bee*, August 3rd, 1839.

¹¹⁹ *The Working Bee*, August 3rd, 1839, briefly mentions the departure of the colonies first Secretary Samuel Rowbotham in just two lines and in contrast the 23rd of November 1839 goes to some lengths in its discussion of the expulsion of John Greene. The Trustees taking his wife and son into the community.

¹²⁰ Seymour R. Kesten *Utopian Episodes: Daily Life in Experimental Colonies Dedicated to the Changing World* (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1995), pp.10-30.

exemplifies this bold approach.¹²¹ William Hodson in contrast writes under his own name and his contributions read more like someone addressing a public meeting or a congregation. This speaks to the orality of its audience, whether they were in the alehouse or the family home. An individual reading to a group, speaking a language derived from popular ballads or Christian scripture.

Robert Southey traced popular unrest directly to:

the weekly epistles of the apostates of sedition ... It is the weekly paper which finds its way to the pothouse in town, and the alehouse in the country, inflaming the turbulent temper of the manufacturer, and disturbing the quiet attachment of the peasants to those institutions under which he his fathers have dwelt in peace. He receives no account of public affairs ... but what comes through these polluted sources.¹²²

The impact of Owenite socialism as disseminated at Manea, roused fear in the local elites that socialism would capture the most intelligent members of the working – classes. For it was in the promotion and propagation of ideas that lay Owenism's greatest strength.¹²³ As, T. E Craig writing in the *New Moral World* asserted,

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 the means of enjoyment and of health and happiness¹²⁴

The anonymous Fen Farmer writing to the *Cambridge General Advertiser* in August 1839 had makes abundantly clear the disruptive potentiality of *The Working Bee* and

¹²¹ James Epstein, *Radical Expression : Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.116. *The Working Bee* September 14th, 1839.

¹²² Kevin Gilmartin *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth Century England* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p.74.

¹²³ J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America : The Quest for the New Moral World* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969), p.230.

¹²⁴ *New Moral World*, 25th August 1838.

the ideas it was disseminating to the local populous.

The obvious effects of such a publication as this amongst the poorer classes in this neighbourhood it is fearful to contemplate, and I trust that this Letter may have the effect of inducing pious and well disposed persons to IMMEDIATE steps to counteract the sting of the Working Bee. If this be not done, I fear we shall, before long, find that the fearful scenes of 1816 will be enacted in this place and neighbourhood.¹²⁵

His words were endorsed by George Pearson, Christian Advocate for the University of Cambridge:

It is impossible to say how much mischief such a body may be capable of doing amongst the more ignorant and depraved parts of the neighbouring population, by personal exertions, *secretly and cautiously employed*, of cheap publications of an infidel and revolutionary character ... I am informed, on good authority, that the colony at Manea are very assiduous, both by preaching and the dispersion of small tracts, in the propagation of their infidel and revolutionary doctrines¹²⁶

Pearson in his letter sees a direct connection between the efforts of such groups and movements of Chartists and Owenites in spreading a political education to working people:

I fear that we are reaping some of the fruits of these infernal efforts in the treason, the rebellion, the riot, and the outrage which have so recently distracted those places where these opinions have been most extensively circulated.¹²⁷

The Working Bee offered a political education and spoke to their material condition of working people offering them a repertoire of fighting words and ideas and the

¹²⁵ *Cambridge General Advertiser*, August 14th, 1839.

¹²⁶ *Cambridge Chronicle and Huntingdonshire Gazette*, October 19th, 1839.

¹²⁷ *Cambridge Chronicle and Huntingdonshire Gazette*, 19th October 1839.

promise of a world transformed. Ideas, crystallised in printed texts, were attempts to engage with and transform the world as it was at the local level. Such texts and ideas were crafted by actors trying to do something, at particular points in history, to communicate with audiences and communities for acts of defence or resistance.¹²⁸

Hodson's venture at Manea Fen strikingly took advantage of The Association of All Classes of All Nations, with its network of local branches which in May 1839 became the Universal Society of Rational Religionists. It was organization possessing a directory and over fifty district boards with departments, officers and travelling missionaries. The organization enrolled over 3000 members. They offered collective self-help providing benefits in the form of unemployment assistance, pensions and education and a rich culture of lectures, discussion groups and reading rooms. As Langdon points out there is a real irony in that the first venture to avail itself of the Rational Religionists network was a colony that was not sanctioned by the movement.¹²⁹ Hodson was able to piggyback onto these networks making personal contacts with social missionaries, committees, and branches. Samuel Rowbotham the Secretary of the colony alongside Hodson toured the northern branches. Finding a receptive audience in such places as Rochdale, Salford, Oldham, Liverpool, Huddersfield and Stockport. On Sunday March 10th, 1839, Hodson visited East London Branch No. 1 at the Hall of Science, Finsbury where he sat down to tea with 124 people in the afternoon with 'a good sprinkling of females, wives and members present' and in the evening the hall was crowded to hear him

¹²⁸ Malcolm Chase, Paine, Spence, Chartism and 'The Real Rights of Man' in *Thomas Spence: The Poor Man's Revolutionary*, ed. by Alastair Bonnett and Keith Armstrong, (London, Breviary Stuff Publications, 2014), p.14.

¹²⁹ John C. Langdon, *Pocket Editions Of The New Jerusalem: Owenite Communitarianism in Britain 1825-1855* (Unpublished: University of York: DPhil, 200), pp.121-122.

speak and as he came forward 'a burst of applause greeted his appearance.'¹³⁰

Oral culture is by its nature ephemeral, and historians of the early 19th Century in England are dependent almost exclusively on written sources. This causes several issues in the recording and reporting of lectures and debates which arise from the bias or indifference of the reporter, bad acoustics in the hall, or the poor diction of the speakers. William Hodson's performances and those other Owenite lecturers are recorded and presented to the reader by either friends or foes alike – verbatim reporting was in its infancy, and unless a lecturer supplied a copy of his/her speech it would be wholly dependent on the reporter in the hall to capture accurately the speech act.¹³¹ The public meeting was not like the editorial article of a newspaper, it was an interactive engagement between audience and speaker, with interruptions and objections being voiced and so such crucial things as tone, gesture and accent are largely lost to us or completely neglected in the reporting of debates.¹³²

A significant draw for Victorian audiences was the political debate with a speaker with a contentious or controversial opinion or topic. Robert Owen for instance became involved in the controversy surrounding the letter from Rev. Pearson to the *Cambridge Chronicle* and challenged Pearson to a debate, which the good reverend declined.¹³³ Equally, there is evidence that William Hodson was an accomplished public performer and Manea held weekly debates and elocution classes which speaks to their desire to foster groups of social missionaries able to argue

¹³⁰ *The Social Pioneer, Record of the Progress of Socialism*, March 23rd, 1839.

¹³¹ P. A. Pickering "Class without Words: Symbolic Communication in the Chartist Movement." *Past & Present*, no. 112, (1986), pp. 144–162.

¹³² Pickering, 1986, pp.150-151.

¹³³ *Working Bee*, December 14th, 1839.

persuasively for the cause of Owenite socialism.¹³⁴ Hodson spoke across the midlands in late 1839, successful attracting new recruits and stimulating local interest. He appeared on the 28th of December 1839 in Lincoln, the *Lincolnshire Chronicle* reported that he spoke on the topic of the 'new social system' which according to the *Lincolnshire chronicle*, no friend of the radical cause was 'truly ridiculous that the learned orator was laughed from his seat by his more sensible hearers'. Hodson was nothing less than a 'spouter of infidelity' uttering 'blasphemous effusions' and he was nothing less than a 'minion of mischief'.¹³⁵ Hodson like other radical public speakers was contesting the naturalness of meanings and challenging dominant groups in society, as Martin points out before people can become mobilized, they require a political language to provide a 'diagnosis of the sources of their problem' and a viable strategy to resolve that problem. Whether it was via print or charismatic platform oratory, these radical actors were able to mobilize political opinion primarily through a skilled use of language.¹³⁶ Hodson is part of a radical culture using the print and platform creating a radical eco-system. The speech acts connects with a physical audience, which are then reported via the medium of the press locally or nationally allied to it being covered through Owenite and radical publications which in turn stimulates correspondence and debate in print conveyed to an audience through such practices as reading aloud which then attracts further invitations to speak – creating a form of feedback loop.¹³⁷

Manea Colony was just one piece in a wider mosaic of radical activity centred on

¹³⁴ *Working Bee*, April 4th, 1840.

¹³⁵ *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, January 3rd, 1840.

¹³⁶ Janette, Martin, "Oratory, Itinerant Lecturing and Victorian Popular Politics: A Case Study of James Acland (1799-1876)." *Historical Research : The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 86.231 (2013), p.31.

¹³⁷ Kevin. Gilmartin, "Popular Radicalism and the Public Sphere." *Studies in Romanticism* 33.4 (1994), pp.550-51.

Wisbech and Peterborough and at the heart of these activities was James Hill, corn dealer, former banker and founder and proprietor of the radical newspaper *The Star In The East* in Wisbech. Hill was a critical friend of Owenism arguing for a more open and inclusive approach to advancing the cause of socialism and opposing what he considered its increasing sectarian character.¹³⁸ To achieve this aim he proposed a United Advancement Society in which working men subscribed a shilling a week, and with the capital they would buy ten acres of land whose produce they would sell, and slowly they would be able to make bricks and construct buildings.¹³⁹ By March 1838 they had three hundred members and began to deal in basic commodities, such as flour and tea – a co-operative enterprise.¹⁴⁰ By May it had four hundred members and a branch opened in Peterborough in August which attracted over two hundred members and another opened in March. A Mental Improvement Society was founded in Wisbech which attracted seven hundred members subscribing six pence per quarter, which provided for concerts, lectures and a reading room. On May 13th 1838 a festival was held on the land owned by the United Advanced Society, six hundred people marched to the banks of the River Nene, carrying two banners, one bearing the societies name and other bearing the legend 'The Land of the People' accompanied by a brass band, and sat down to tea; during the afternoon there was dancing round a Maypole followed by a ball in the evening.¹⁴¹ Epstein shows the importance of symbols as well as words, centring on the complex meanings of parades and dining arguing these social dramas of 'flags, processions, dining and toasting formed part of an arena of contested meaning' and were a way of

¹³⁸ *Star in the East, The Truth, Nothing But The Truth*, May 19th & June 3rd, 1838.

¹³⁹ *Star in the East*, February 24th, 1838.

¹⁴⁰ *Star in the East*, March 16th, 1838

¹⁴¹ *Star in the East*, May 18th, 1839.

articulating a class identity.¹⁴² Through such rituals as dining and parading radical activists were defining a distinctively oral and visual political culture and a instigating and contributing to a radical public sphere whose discourse was oppositional and transgressive of ruling elite conventions and power.

In conclusion this chapter highlights the potential of a local historical study to show the variegated and diversity of reading publics in early 19th Century England and how print offered a political education to groups excluded from mainstream political culture who remain largely invisible from the historical record. The Manea Colony contributed to a flourishing radical local counter-public that was never solely dependent on the written word – parading, public speaking and dining were part of a rich repository of signs and symbols, and the colonists were uniquely placed to connect and take advantage of existing radical networks at both the local and national level. Contra to Stephenson the agricultural working-class were not a backwater untouched by wider political issues and activism, but in the context Manea and the surrounding fenland communities was the centre of a radical counter-public. *The Working Bee* was a medium for promoting the views of Owenism beyond its leadership as conveyed in *The New Moral World*. It argued that through emulation people could build a socialist paradise based on rational principles rather than promoting themselves as a revolutionary vanguard in the countryside posing as a violent revolutionary threat to local ruling elites, but they did expose how fearful these elites were of the educative potentiality of Owenite radicalism offering a politically education and language and speaking to the interests of a rural working-class. Manea and its self-publishing venture was not beholden to market rationality, it

¹⁴² Epstein, 1994, p.71 & p.164.

was a vehicle for voices often excluded and speaking to topics and radically different schools of thought beyond the mainstream culture. Ultimately, it is not how numerous or how large the following the *Working Bee* developed, or how suitable their ideology they espoused for mobilizing people, what really mattered was their contribution to extending the boundaries of what could be said, where it could be said, and who could say it. In doing so it was building on both a national and local radical counter-public, and that the Cambridgeshire fenland far from being a place of political apathy, was never quiet, but full of voices calling for societal change during this period.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion this study has been an account of a small groups of people who

were united in their rejection of the dominant culture of nineteenth-century English society. It demonstrates the value of a local study in illuminating the range and diversity of ideas circulating in rural areas during the early Victorian period. The Manea colony went beyond mere criticism of what already existed and were, in themselves, experiments in alternative forms of organisation – living examples of new reality that the rest of society might see and follow. This study has shown how they challenged, lived, and contributed to building an alternative world. The colony provides evidence which highlights the complexity of living communally. The work was hard, internal strife was not uncommon, but through rules, dress and the daily rituals of work and leisure created a functioning enterprise and spoke a socialist ideology which emphasised collectivism over individuality. The architecture of the community was highly symbolic and related directly to the way community values were defined. For example, group housing, communal dining and the erection of a viewing platform were used to convey principles of shared life, cooperation, and equality. Manea is fully of contradictions on one hand it is impossible not recognise its sectarian character and the chosen remoteness of its location, but it was never a hermetically sealed space, visitors came from within the Owenite movement and from local communities – like other socialist communal ventures it saw itself as a beacon of reason in a sea of ignorance pointing to and leading people to a new moral world based on rational principles which once seen and experienced would be universally adopted.

Manea exposes how ingrained highly gendered notions of what was considered women's work were with the community, but it also highlights that these women were not passive subjects, but active agents, able to shape and challenge the colony in

doing so demonstrates the limits of communal living and seeing that living in a cooperative was not a panacea for women's lives. Within the community women were able to organise themselves and structure their daily work patterns exercising a degree of autonomy. Unlike the dominant culture they had access to and were encouraged to become educated citizens, not mere subjects or chattels of their spouses but enjoying equal rights as men, and able to speak on topics concerning sexual equality and sexual liberation far beyond the realms of permissible discourse in early Victorian England. The colony's desire to adopt rational principles in relation to marriage and the failure of the first iteration highlight how dominant-culture behaviours are motivated by what might be called 'common sense' assumptions. The open advocacy of co-habitation and easy divorce may have been present in working-class communities, but to voice this in a public arena and to adopt this in practice was beyond the bounds of acceptable behaviour for many of the colony's founding members and led to accusations of immorality – evidence from Manchester points to a movement where increasingly working-class activists were concerned with material issues rather than cultural ones.

The colonists were not isolated from radical networks but were part of a circuit of radical thought and activism. Print was central to Owenism, it was a movement of ideas rather than mass meetings. The *Working Bee* has been central to this study, and its turbulent origins mirror the failure of the national leadership to form experimental communities allowing William Hodson to forge ahead with the Manea colony and become an alternative voice for those disenchanted with the slow progress of those at the national level. Equally, it offered a political education to its readership – education and the potential of education was central to Owenism, and

the colony actively taught its hired labourers to read and write. The response to their inhouse publication by local elites shows the revolutionary threat the ideas of socialism offered – the Hodsonian's were never a revolutionary or terrorist organisation seeking to use violence to establish a new order, it was through the propagation of ideas and emulation of their colony scheme, that people would recognise the practical, enlightened rationalism of Owenism which would inevitably lead to a peaceful transformation of all English society.

Manea shows the sophistication of radical networks in early 19th Century England, William Hodson followed a well-worn path of the platform and print speaking across the northwest and midlands stimulating debate both to audiences and readership. The countryside was not politically quiet, and Manea was just one part of a radical counter-public centred on the activities of James Hill in Wisbech. The radical newspaper, cooperative store, reading room, alongside public parading and platforming show the richness of the local political culture of working-class people who were active in the rural Cambridgeshire countryside, but active in contributing to a wider political public sphere both at the national and local levels.

Manea offers us the idea that humans themselves can imagine, build, and strive for a better society. They were a creative response to a dominant culture increasingly enthral to liberal political economy and the growing power of industrial capitalism. Manea was not looking backwards to some imagined golden age of class harmony but was committed to build a modern world, utilizing the technologies and scientific transformations afforded by steam power to build a world of communal prosperity and a rejection of competitive society. This study has shown that the colony was

primarily an act of social and cultural resistance. Their fundamental idealism and resistance to mainstream values allied to their desire to teach by example continues to provoke and offer alternatives to the existing status quo.

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