

THE MANEA SOCIETY

BY ENID PORTER

An experiment in community living took place in the Fens just over a hundred years ago. It was a scheme inspired by William Hodson of Upwell who at different times was a lay preacher, horse-breaker and seaman. Enid Porter tells in this article how the scheme eventually foundered.

THE somewhat remote fenland village of Manea might well be thought an unexpected site for an experiment in community living, yet such a scheme was tried out there in the third decade of the last century. The man behind it was William Hodson of Brimstone Hill, Upwell — an address which some of his many critics and opponents thought a highly appropriate one. Born in 1808 he had had a varied career before settling down as a farmer. At one period he was a horse-breaker, at another a Methodist lay-preacher and he had also spent six years at sea, which gained for him the nickname of "Sailor."

Inspired by the Socialist doctrines of Robert Owen of Lanark, who sought to improve the condition of the underprivileged employed in the factories and mills, Hodson sent to the Wisbech-published newspaper, *The Star in the East*, a letter dated 5th September, 1838. He addressed it "To the Working Classes, the Real Producers of Wealth," and in it he announced his intention of setting up, on 200 acres which he owned near Manea, a Colony to consist, initially, of 50 families who would cultivate the land and eventually buy it from him, build their own houses and lead a life of perfect unity and equality, having as their motto "Each for All." All those interested in joining the community and able to contribute £15 each to help with the expenses of the first year, were invited to send in their applications.

Further details of his plan were given by Hodson to the journal *The New Moral World* published by Robert Owen. He claimed that his experiment would provide a solution to contemporary social problems, for you can never be truly happy whilst you are obliged to touch your hat brinks and call those your superiors who live upon your labours, and take all the advantages they can in keeping you in fear and subjection.

He intended, he wrote, that 50 houses should be built immediately from bricks made on the site, the houses to be

so constructed with flues as to heat them to any required temperature, thus avoiding the labour of making fifty fires, to consume an immense fuel besides dirtying the room you live in and also removing the possibility of your children being burnt to death.

The many followers of Robert Owen were divided in their views of Hodson's scheme. One man, sent from Salford to inspect the Manea site, reported enthusiastically on it and on the "clear, concise and business-like nature of Mr. Hodson's arrangements." But in April 1839, one of the first colonists returned home to Stockport complaining that in the three months he had been in Manea he had received no wages. There were complaints, too, from others who joined the community and then left; but a colonist who stayed wrote to *The New Moral World* to say that any dissatisfaction felt was due to the members themselves: They commenced finding fault with one another and with everything about the place and went on to describe the drunken orgies which lasted, often, all through the night.

Hodson, too, was disappointed by some of the first arrivals in Manea and described them, in an article in *The New Moral World* in which he tried to counter criticisms of his colony, as . . . penniless in pocket and bankrupt of moral qualifications; incurring me in great sums in their expenses and causing much unpleasant feelings by the vulgarity of their manners . . . That such parties should, when they returned to their old associations, make out the best tale they could is not to be wondered at, nor need you be surprised that their relations, absurd as they are, should be listened to with the greatest avidity by our opponents.

Because so much adverse criticism of Manea appeared in *The New Moral World*, the colonists decided to found a newspaper of their own, to be called *The Working Bee*, the first number of which was issued on 20th July, 1839. The

to next page ►

CHPL 2 (13) 1968 July

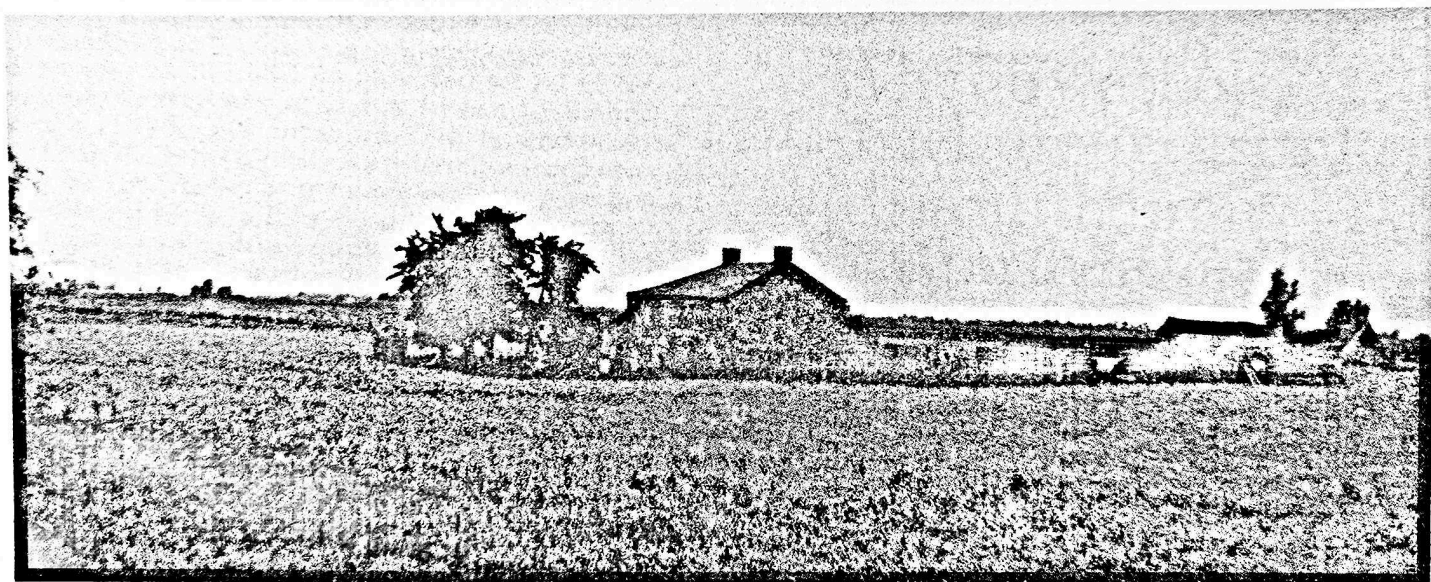
editorial, which gave the colonists the name of "Communists," declared: All amongst us is ours. No mine or theirs is here in our community, but universal commonalty of interest is felt and expressed throughout our establishment.

The summer of 1839 was a busy one. The Manea estate was conveyed by Hodson to four trustees under whose direction more houses were built, the colonists making the bricks and baking them in a kiln connected to the building site by 250 yards of metal track. A communal dining room for 50 people was erected together with a kitchen, dormitories, a printing room and an observatory which had two platforms on which members could sit and drink tea. On the top of the building was hoisted the French tri-colour with the Union Jack — symbolising conquered tyranny — below. Plans were made to build 72 more cottages on three sides of a square, the fourth side being open to the Old Bedford River; eventually, it was hoped, there would be six or eight such squares, although before this could be achieved a windmill would, the trustees decided, have to be built to drain the clay pit.

sailing boat, "The Morning Star" and some six-oared craft in which they made excursions up and down the Old Bedford, singing songs as they went.

In June it was announced in *The Working Bee* that a "Machine Establishment" was to be set up for making agricultural implements, the Colony having been offered a steam engine, furnace and other foundry equipment. Appeals were made for mechanics to come to Manea so that the foundry could be started, and at the same time the newspaper advertised for men from the Potteries who could make such things as chimney and flower pots, while a special Notice to the Public announced that bricks, tiles, drain pipes, worsted and other stockings could be supplied to customers and delivered by boat.

Members of the community — and they came from all parts of England — received no money for their work but were given labour notes which could be exchanged for goods at the store. They wore distinctive dress: the men a Robin Hood-like green tunic with trousers and caps (replaced by straw hats in summer), the women dresses over trousers or



Colony Farm, Manea. A photograph taken in 1951. The house may be part of the one in which William Hodson lived.

Meanwhile the land was being cultivated and was producing wheat, oats and pasture for cattle; a schoolmaster was giving classes in the library; a gymnasium was in daily use and there was talk of building a laboratory; the leisure hours of the colonists were being carefully organised. On Sundays dancing and games of cricket and bowls were arranged and time was given for reading to improve the mind. Debates were held on Mondays, music and elocution classes on Tuesdays and Fridays, and on Saturdays there was more dancing.

At the end of the year the windmill was finished, and in honour of the Registrar of the Friendly Societies, was ceremonially named "Todd Pratt." The mill gave the colonists the power needed to work a circular saw, to turn a lathe, to pump water from the clay pit and even, by means of a shaft attached to the engine, to operate circular brushes for cleaning boots and knives.

By the spring of 1840 the community had acquired a

pantaloons. Labourers in the fields went to work to the accompaniment of music. The Colony certainly made an impression on the surrounding neighbourhood, and so many visitors came to see it that a special guide had to be appointed to take them round. Financial affairs seemed satisfactory. The colonists had repaid to William Hodson £600 and they estimated that, at this rate, they would be in debt-free possession of the land in about three years' time.

Meanwhile recruitment drives for more members and for hired labourers were conducted through the pages of *The Working Bee* and by lecture tours by Hodson in the Midlands. In his speeches he proposed the establishment of branch depots at which articles made at Manea could be sold. His tours attracted some attention and on occasions he was heckled, mainly by the clergy, for the expression of his radical views, particularly on the subject of marriage. Indeed, Cambridgeshire clergy, and farmers too, expressed

concern at some of the *avant-garde* articles in *The Working Bee*.

It is clear, wrote one correspondent to the *Cambridge Advertiser*, that the editor and his correspondents... entertain very lax notions of morals and the intercourse of the sexes.

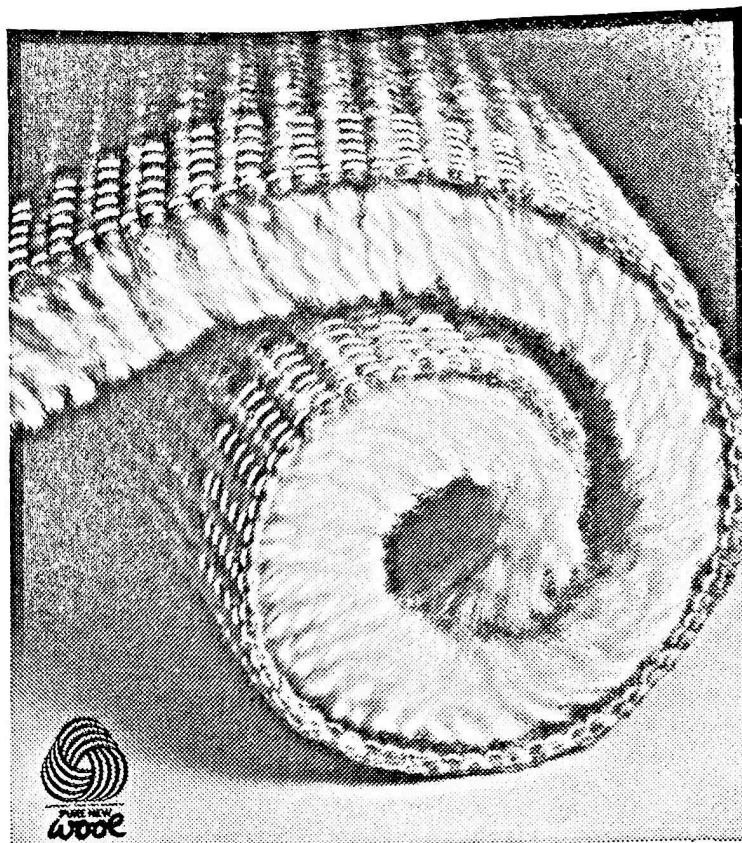
Hodson's tours did not win approval from the Owenites who suggested that he, and fellow speakers from Manea, would be better staying in the community than standing on a lecture platform. But Hodson was anxious to obtain the co-operation of his critics for he wanted financial help from their Central Board and, also, a union of the other communities which had been formed in the country, notably at Tytherly in Hampshire and at Pant-Glas in Wales. But his proposal was rejected and from that moment the decline of Manea set in.

Hodson had invested most of his capital, amounting to upwards of £5,000 in his scheme. Distrusted by the Owenites, deprived of the aid he had received from his friend James Hill of Wisbech, whose bank failed in 1840, and faced with having to run Manea indefinitely out of his own resources, he apparently found the odds against him too high. He had personal difficulties, too; his wife did not share his Socialist views and his moral conduct was criticised by the Manea trustees.

He finally resigned from the office of President of the trustees; the community members, though many of them considered him unfit to continue as an ordinary member of the directing board, could not, however, get rid of him completely as they were dependent on him for financial assistance. There was still a large debt outstanding and even an article in *The Working Bee* pointed out that if every one of its 5,000 readers bought a pair of stockings made at Manea this would keep three stocking makers at work for a year, the money so raised would not be sufficient to pay off the debt.

Just before Christmas, 1840, Hodson ordered the contractors, who had supplied the community with meat, to stop delivery. The members held a meeting and decided to take over the management of affairs, to dismiss all the hired workers, to sell the boats and to obtain legal advice. Hodson promptly seized all the account books and refused to give them up. Quarrels broke out between the pro-Hodson and the anti-Hodson factions. Many of the members left and in a short time the remainder followed and the Colony, which had brought life, gaiety and even pageantry to the Manea fens was abandoned. In 1844 Hodson, a bankrupt, went to America.

A reminder of his community lingered on in the name Colony Farm, at the end of a drove ending at the bank of the Old Bedford. It is probable that he himself lived in the house when he was in Manea. The site of the community can hardly, in the last century, have been ideal, for there would have been constant threat of flooding in winter while, to workers from the North and Midlands, the flat, damp Fens must often have seemed dreary surroundings in which to settle. Experiments such as the Manea Colony were almost doomed to fail, for they did not take into sufficient account the weaknesses of human nature which come to surface in a communal way of life; nor did they estimate the strength of the opposition which they aroused. But for all that they did something to pave the way for the great advances in social justice which were to take place during the next hundred years.



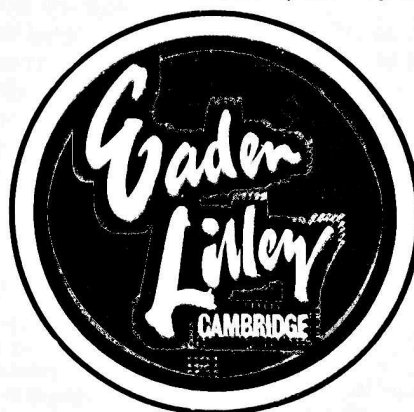
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