

In 1994 I began an M.A. course in English Local History at Leicester University, which proved to be the most interesting two years of my life as student or teacher. I realised that local and regional history was crucial to understanding the national story so beloved of school histories. On a field trip to Devon in my final year, seeking a topic for a final dissertation, I found myself in Tavistock looking at a labourer's cottage.



COTTAGES ON DOLVIN ROAD, TAVISTOCK

cottages built for working men and their families on the Russell estates in Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire in the nineteenth century, although other estates would be mentioned as points of reference.

Where was the evidence to come from? It would need to be primary in origin and local in character. The first obvious primary source was the cottages themselves, often altered from the original design, but essentially a physical map representative of the waves of cottage construction completed between 1830 and 1914. These could be mapped, recorded, photographed and compared with the original plans and material costs preserved in the Russell Estate Archive still held in the County Record Office in Bedford. I could explore plot size, drawings material costs and architectural styles of each wave of building together with the correspondence between the Duke and his agents which accompanied it.

A number of questions occurred. What was the scale and scope of their philanthropy? How typical were they of the landowning class? How did adverse economic conditions affect their resolve? To answer these, I looked at three individuals: Francis the seventh, Hastings the ninth and Herebrand the eleventh Dukes of Bedford. In 1839 Francis, the seventh Duke, was left the Bedford estate with a debt to the sum of £556.000. To pay this he adopted a twin track approach to managing the estate. Firstly, he began aggressive trading in land together with heavy investment in improvements such as drainage. Secondly, he undertook a determined

'FIRST DUTY AND TRUEST PLEASURE'

RESEARCHING LOCAL HISTORY

By Paul Oliver

The date brick had a familiar motif, a letter B with the date 1845 underneath. For many years my route to work in a Bedfordshire comprehensive school took me through Woburn Abbey and the villages of the Russell family estate, past rows of cottages marked in an identical way. Were these labourer's cottages the topic I sought to research? My supervisor thought it both original and practical, and so my thesis became an examination of



and extensive repair and rebuilding programme. Francis was not alone among great landowners in acquiring and improving land, but in repairing and building he had few equals. He summed up his philosophy in a letter to Lord Chichester President of the Royal Agricultural Society published together with his plans for model cottages in the society's journal in 1849:

‘to improve the dwellings
of the labouring class and
afford them means of greater
cleanliness, health and comfort
in their own homes, to extend
education and thus raise the
social and moral habits of those
most valuable members of the
community, are among the first
duties and ought to be among
the truest pleasures of every
landlord’.

Between 1843 and 1861 he and Bennett, his steward, supervised the construction of 720 cottages and 10 schools on all estates this besides numerous repairs and rebuilds. Sir Henry Acland Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford wrote of Francis in 1884:



FRANCIS - 7TH DUKE OF BEDFORD



COTTAGES IN THE MARKET TOWN OF AMPHILL



COTTAGES IN THE VILLAGE OF COPLE, BEDFORDSHIRE

'The amount of thought that is bestowed on the Thousands of cottages of this great proprietor in diverse parts of England is itself a lesson of lifelong exertion in the case of the village labourer'

It became obvious that the Russells represented something extraordinary in great landowning families of the time. Often held up as 'paragons of virtue' by contemporaries, they saw as their first duty, the land and those who worked on it.

That their resolve held in the economic depression of the last quarter of the Nineteenth century can be seen from the attitudes of Hastings the ninth duke who succeeded in 1872, he steadfastly refused to place cottages with farms, so relieving the estate of repair costs, arguing that by keeping them in his hands the community and the estate was better served. His attitude is summed up by his lawyer Mr Wing speaking to Stephenson the Dukes agent:

'Mr Stephenson, the Duke cannot in his position go on taking rent from a poor man without putting his House in order'

His paternalism was matched by Herebrand the eleventh Duke who set out his credo in his book of 1897 'A Great Agricultural Estate' in a passage which begins with an appreciation of the contribution made by his ancestors he goes states:

'I know of no more satisfying form of philanthropy possible for the owner of a great estate, than the provision of good cottages'

The immense burden the cottages had become is revealed by the fact that in 1897 on the estates in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire the annual loss per cottage was 27/-; whilst on the Thorney estate in Cambridgeshire, the annual loss was £5 per cottage. This was made worse by the fact that out of 1,085 cottages 300 were occupied by non productive labour such as pensioners and widows. Many cynics have argued that with

their London property income they could afford to sustain these losses but the fact remains they were among the very few who continued to build quality housing for working people up to and even after the first world war. In his book 'English Philanthropy 1660-1960' David Owen describes the contribution of the landed aristocracy's to philanthropy:

'with some important exceptions... the aristocratic class cannot be thought of as a genuinely creative force in the philanthropy of the age'

It seems then that the Russell family were exceptional, the sheer scale of their achievement pioneered good practice in this difficult area of social provision, What began with half digested observations on my journeys to work ended with a satisfying experience of local history.



HASTINGS - 9TH DUKE OF BEDFORD



HEREBRAND 11TH DUKE OF BEDFORD