

LAND & LIBERTY

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IS THERE A LAND QUESTION?

In a bundle of news clippings sent us for what may be of interest, we take the following examples of land-lord ransom that is holding up and penalizing progress in all parts of the country.

Southgate: A School.—The Middlesex County Council decided in February, 1934, to make an order for the compulsory purchase of about 5½ acres of land on the west side of Powys Lane, Southgate, for the erection of a technical school. The Sites and Buildings Committee now reported that the District Valuer had been able to complete negotiations with the owners and had provisionally agreed the purchase price at £7,337. The committee agreed to recommend the County Council to purchase at this figure.—*Enfield Gazette*, 22nd November.

The price of £7,337 for 5½ acres of land is equivalent to £1,334 per acre. See the delay in building that school, the search for a site, the need for compulsory orders to buy it, the deliberations in Committee, the charge upon the ratepayers of £7,337 for land which 10 years ago would have been dear at £10 a year rent—and then pretend "there is nothing in the land question." The school may teach technology, how to build roads and railways, how to apply the last word of science to industry and the economic use of materials; but it will have its own experience as the very best lesson, proving that all the improvements its pupils can effect, when they apply their training, will be swallowed up into the maw of the land monopoly. Will they be taught to see that this monstrous frustration of industrial effort and material progress cannot and must not continue? What use is the technology which is blind to the factors that accompany the growth of communities, as Southgate has grown with the coming of the tube railway; land withheld from use till it reaches a famine price and exempt all the time from any contribution on the part of the holder, while taxes are heaped upon production, and every piece of useful work done brings along the assessor for another turn of the screw?

Tees Valley: Water Supply.—The proposed purchase of land (Stockton and Tees-side *Herald*, 14th December) for the Hewley reservoir, Normanby, at a cost of between £30,000 and £40,000 brought lively discussion and urgent appeal for thorough investigation at the December meeting of the Tees Valley Water Board. Alderman S. A. Sadler, Chairman, said it was the only land that would be suitable for the Board in that area. Mr Collinson, manager and engineer, said that the Board had no option on the land but they had powers of compulsory purchase.

So the discussion goes on: Resolutions to start negotiations; the Stockton Town Council to be consulted—then more negotiations; then arbitration—all to decide what price the people in the district have to pay for permission to gather the rain from the skies so that it may flow through the faucets in their kitchens. Price to whom and why? The proximity of Stockton to a catchment area "the only land that is suitable," or of the catchment area to Stockton, and the people's need for an absolute necessity of life, give opportunity for tribute; but clearly it is God's rain the people must pay for, when it is caught and held on solid earth. The water question is a land question, and no one will be more eloquent in that assertion than the agents of the landowner when the arbitration case is in court.

Trowbridge: Fields as Building Sites.—All agricultural land, no matter how valuable, is exempt from local taxation. Tory governments have seen to this in the interests of landowners by a series of Acts culminating in the "derating legislation of 1929." So, when it was stated "they are asking £240 an acre for farm land," the ordinary man could well reply: it is wicked, the owner neither gave that land its value nor does he pay a penny piece in local rates. It was a case of acquiring land for houses at Staverton near Trowbridge, as reported in the *Bristol Evening World*, 25th February, the Bradford and Melksham Rural District being concerned about the over-crowding in the village. Here in this quiet corner of England the land monopoly is in occupation and there is nothing "symbolic" about it, nor is there any League of Nations or Locarno to settle who has equal rights in the territory. With the support of laws transcending Versailles in iniquity, the equal right to the use of land is defied, and so everywhere throughout the country.

The Rural District Council is prepared to go cap in hand to the landowner saying "won't you accept £185 an acre, don't you think it enough?" It is about time they showed a different temper, not throwing themselves and the badly housed on the generosity of a nice kind landowner, ready to abate a price. They are administering bad laws, under which they are forced to tax houses and allow land values to be entirely exempt. Their whole revenue should be taken by rates on land values and the houses should be rate free. They should be demanding legislation that would require every landholder to contribute according to the true value of the land whether it is used or not. That is the solution of their problem, of the house famine, of the school sites in Southgate and elsewhere, of the difficulties and obstacles placed in the way of water schemes and all other municipal enterprise.

Afforestation.—There was "plenty of land," said Sir Roy Robinson, chairman of the Forestry Commission, at the annual meeting of the Forestry Society in Edinburgh on 21st February "The difficulty was for the Forestry Commission to get hold of it on such reasonable terms that they could economically plant it and raise up remunerative forests on it." Our italics are our comment. It is well said, Sir Roy. There is plenty of that kind of land for any and every purpose throughout the length and breadth of the country, but it has a "price ticket" attached to it.

Lancashire Roads.—A brief report that speaks for itself. The Highways and Bridges Committee of the County Council (*Manchester Guardian*, 7th March) have before them what looks like a "five years' plan" involving an expenditure of over £6,000,000. But even with that vast sum the Committee seem to have reckoned without

their host, for they point out that: "Negotiations for the purchase of further lands and easements required for proposed improvements to classified roads having been unsuccessful the committee recommend an application to the Ministry of Transport for an order for their compulsory acquisition."

House Building and Street Widening.—Apparently the Bo'ness Town Council were prepared to carry through certain schemes (*Glasgow Herald*, 11th March), the prices and rates having been arrived at "after protracted negotiations"; but then the Town Council is not disposing only of its own funds in this matter. The Department of Health also has a say, and it declares that the prices of sites are too high. So the Department and the district valuer are asked to carry through further negotiations on their own account. The schemes held up are for the widening of Main Street, for 70 or 80 houses on ground belonging to Cadell's trustees and a similar number of houses on ground belonging to the Parish Trust Seaboard Society. If the Council would just say what prices have been "arrived at" and how the properties now stand on the valuation roll, the public might gladly give an opinion on the transaction.

Glasgow Housing.—The Corporation seek to buy two acres separated by Great Western Road (*Glasgow Herald*, report, 22nd February). The proprietors object to a compulsory order maintaining that the ground is in an area town-planned for industrial or commercial purposes. The advocate for the proprietors, the Scotstoun Estate, maintained that the price the Corporation would require to pay "would make houses erected on it prohibitively expensive." Mr Gordon, for the Corporation, said *they had paid far more than the maximum sum mentioned in the objections, namely, £1 per square yard* (italics ours), but the price mentioned was not necessarily the price they would pay for the land. That would be a matter for subsequent negotiation. Let's hope so. But £1 per square yard—£4,840 per acre for housing sites? Was King Edward told of ransom at this rate, when he was up there the other day looking at Clydeside slums?

Shields: A Sea Frontage.—The *Shields Gazette*, 14th December, reported: Negotiations are still in progress for the purchase by South Shields Corporation of the cliffs between the promenade end and Marsden Rock but it is unlikely that the deal will be completed this year."

The Corporation's offer was still £2,000 below the price which the Harton Coal Company and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, the joint owners of the land, were believed to be asking. When publicity was first given to the Council's ambition it was stated that the amount asked by the landowners was in the region of £20,000.

The land lies between the Coast Road and the cliff edge and being for the most part "agricultural," it contributes little enough to the town's revenues. But "£20,000 for nothing" is landlord's law. It is "the land question."

Salford: Kersal Moor.—The announcement some weeks ago (said the *Salford City Reporter* of 29th November) that the owners of Kersal Moor had decided to offer the land for sale, it will be recalled, caused considerable surprise in the city as it was generally assumed that the Moor belonged to the Corporation.

Apparently it is not so, for now the City Council are "in negotiation with the owners" who are prepared to sell the land for £7,000—20 acres, which is at the rate of £350 an acre. Moreover, the agents of the owners, the Clowes and Byrom estates, have intimated their

willingness to sell a further 10 acres, on the Agecroft side of the Moor, for £3,000.

This is moorland and the price is pure land value; the price of the town's nearness and its need for an open space. The owners are not selling anything they created. In the transaction from which they expect to benefit they will take £10,000 out of the general pool of wealth and place nothing back in exchange, because the sun and the wind and the tang of the Moor were always there for the people's enjoyment.

The land question, as a question, will be answered when this traffic in its value ceases and when the rent of land goes not to any private individual but to the community as a whole. In which dispensation landholders will pay for the advantages they enjoy as landholders, the land they do not use will be set free. State and municipal treasuries no longer drained to endow monopolists, will be filled with a public fund to be dispensed for the good of all and mighty will be the relief from the taxes on production and the consumer that will be rendered unnecessary.

A. W. M.