

## LONDON'S GOLDEN ACRES

Mr. Peter Dacre has put on record, in the *Sunday Express* of December 17, interesting facts and figures about land ownership in London which with due acknowledgments we pass on to our readers. The article was prefaced with the story of the Portman estate, twenty-six acres of which are to be sold this month at auction as "freehold investments," and in 194 lots. They include, of course, land and buildings and the value of all leasehold reversions. They comprise those parts of the estate which lie north of Marylebone Road between Edgware Road and Baker Street, and the present total gross annual income from the ground or rack rents is approximately £63,000. If the prices paid are made known (could Mr. Dacre attend the auction and let us have them?) they should provide quite an instructive lesson contrasting the market value with the present rental and therefore also with the present assessments of all these properties for local and national taxation. At the auction, for anyone with ears to hear, it will be proved again that estate agents, offering all the attractions that are for sale, unconsciously or despite themselves, outrival the advocates of land value taxation in the testimony they give.

But to Mr. Dacre's story:—

### PORTMAN

About 200 years ago one of Lord Portman's family was put on a diet of asses' milk. To ensure a steady supply his lordship bought a herd and some pasture land. In the years between, the Portman pastures have become one of the most valuable parts of central London. If you walk along Oxford Street to Selfridges, up the Edgware Road or through the Clarence Gate of Regent's Park, you are on Portman land. Its 200 acres include five well-known squares: Portman, Bryanston, Manchester, Montagu and Dorset. The estate includes a dozen churches and 40 public houses.

### WESTMINSTER

Just over 350 years ago a Miss Davis married into the family and brought a farmstead as a dowry. It was valued at four shillings a year. Now it is Belgravia, part of 600 acres running from Oxford Street to the Thames which before the war were valued at £20,000,000. Westminster's estate includes Park Lane and Grosvenor Square. He recently sold the west side of the square on a 999-year lease to the American Government for around £1,000,000.

### HOWARD DE WALDEN

Lord Howard de Walden's estate stretches between Oxford Street and Marylebone Road, and includes Harley Street. Between the two wars his father sold over 100 acres for an estimated £7,000,000. Now the estate is operated through a trust.

### BEDFORD

Large areas around Bloomsbury are owned by the Duke of Bedford, while parts of Chelsea still belong to Lord Cadogan, whose ancestors turned slums into a high-class residential district.

### NORTHAMPTON

In the suburbs Lord Northampton has large leaseholds in Tooting and Camberwell. Parts of Lewisham once owned by Lord Forster are still owned by the family through the Forster Estate Development Company.

### DUCHY OF CORNWALL

Some 74 acres of Kennington belong to the Duchy of Cornwall.

### ECCLESIASTICAL COMMISSIONERS

For people in 5,000 acres spread throughout London, the landlords are the Church Commissioners. The Bishop of London has drawn rents from about 1,000 acres around Paddington, Bayswater and Maida Vale ever since the land was presented to the Church by Edward VI. Much of Golders Green belongs to the Church, besides areas in Willesden, Stoke Newington, Brixton and Barnes.

### THE PRUDENTIAL

One of London's biggest landlords is the Prudential Assurance Company, which has £50,000,000's worth of property throughout Britain. An estate expert describes its holdings as "tremendous." Certainly the "Pru" has property in the City, the West End and Kensington, where it has taken over part of Lord Kensington's estate. It also reaps ground rents from most of the suburbs.

### SIR JOHN ELLERMAN

One of London's newer landlords is Sir John Ellerman, who has bought property in Chelsea and the West End. In 1925 he bought 40 acres of the Howard de Walden Estate for an estimated £3,000,000.

### COMPANIES AND TRUSTS

In the City, where the livery companies own ground, the City of London Real Property Company has 80 buildings over 18 acres, worth an estimated £11,000,000.

Another typical property company is Mr. Harold Samuel's Land Securities Investment Trust, which owns such London landmarks as Lansdowne House, Devonshire House, Mayfair Court, the Adelphi and the Ministry of Civil Aviation headquarters at Aerial and Lacon Houses.

### CROWN PROPERTY

Central London is dominated by the Commissioners of Crown Lands, who own 3,500 buildings bringing a gross yearly rental of £1,500,000. They are the landlords around Regent's Park, almost the whole of Regent Street, and in areas near Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, the Strand, the Mall, Millbank and Millionaires' Row in Kensington Palace Gardens. They also own an estate around Victoria Park in Bethnal Green.

In relating the facts, as stated, we disclaim the imputation sometimes made that dukes or titled persons or "big monopolists" should head the queue for the pillory. It is a grave mistake to interpret the facts into assaults of the kind. Not that Mr. Dacre does so or even hints at it. But he conveys the idea that some sort of a "silent revolution" is going on in the reduction of the number of "ducal landlords" and their holdings as illustrated by the sale of a portion of the Portman estate and by some of the other transactions which he has reported. Nothing is changed by what he calls the "modern trend for London to be owned by many companies and trusts." The private appropriation of the rent of land and the power to speculate in its price merely changes hands. In the new hands, landlordism in its claim to own and appropriate the land values that are communally created is as aggressive as ever, if not more so; and more vested interests are enlisted to safeguard a privilege that should be wholly swept away.

Mr. Dacre mentions as a large landowner, the London County Council with its 8,640 acres as another "sign of the times" that the "era of the ducal landlords is fading." But that introduces quite a different aspect of the matter and leads to other considerations. The L.C.C. had to pay such prices to the dukes and others who "faded away" that it threw a heavy charge of debt on London ratepayers; and among the "signs of the times" has all along been the scandal of public land purchase—buying from landowners the values in land which they have done nothing to create. Mr. Dacre's facts and figures about the dukes and all else have a real bearing on the whole question of our land tenure and taxation system. Under it the burden is thrown on the *land user*, the builder, the improver, the householder, the shopkeeper, every one who has to work for a living, whereas it endows and protects those who, as mere monopolists, gather the values attaching to land, be they "big men" or "small men" who thus deprive the community of its property. We accept Mr. Dacre's information as a pointer to where the remedy

lies, excusing him from being engaged in any such purpose. The remedy is by way of the taxation and rating of land values. And significant, although this may be a digression, it was the London County Council itself with the Labour Party then in power in the Council, which took steps on that road when in 1938 it introduced in a hostile Parliament its Site Value Rating Bill. Earlier, in 1931, a Labour Government passed the Snowden Finance Act for a land valuation and a national tax on land values, an Act which the Conservatives repealed. Whatever the Labour Party has done or has not done since 1945, there stands to its discredit and disgrace that it did not re-enact the Snowden Act or revive the London Bill. Not only has the Labour Party failed in that respect; it has been responsible for legislation that has gone in precisely the opposite direction, strangling development with its Town and Country Planning Act and aggravating the injustices of the rating system, by the Local Government Act of 1948.

A. W. M.

## HOW COMMUNISTS TAKE ADVANTAGE—AN ITALIAN INCIDENT

The story behind the riots at Comacchio, N.E. Italy, on January 18, is told in the *Manchester Guardian*, January 27. There is widespread unemployment among the peasants who live in the swampy delta of the Po River where the main industry of fishing for eels is able to support only part of the population. So the fishermen decided they would have to turn to the land. Lacking money, instruments, tractors and farming knowledge they appealed to the Government to drain the land and establish small holdings. A bill to provide for land drainage, road mending and house building in the whole of the delta area, which provided for 400 million lire to be spent on Comacchio alone, was passed through Parliament. The money granted had been held up by a huge over-staffed and hopelessly inefficient bureaucracy. The Minister in charge of the matter came specially from Rome to explain what was proposed. The money was on its way. A very little more patience was necessary and the land drainage would begin. The Government was not idle. It had a frightful legacy from the war and a hundred Comacchios on its hands. It was determined to see Italy back to prosperity and to see justice done on the land. The Minister was well liked. There was no clapping but no hostility either. "But where were all the well educated, wealthy villa owners and their sons who inhabit the rich lands between Bologna and Ferrara? Why was the province absent from its poorest town? Somehow Italian provincial life is in the hands of the least skilled and the middle and upper classes take no part in it. As for the ancient aristocratic families, their heads are buried in the sand like ostriches, for the most part, and have been for centuries." The meeting had been held in December and, no action taken, the Communists on January 18 organised a procession to the town hall to ask for shifts of the unemployed to be engaged on the work, and the land allotted. Three thousand took part. They tried to get into the town hall. The police told the marchers to go home, someone threw a stone, a fight ensued, the police opened fire and a man was killed. The money for the land reclamation scheme has since arrived. As the Rome correspondent of the *M.G.* further remarks: "Now the Communists will say in Comacchio 'The money would never have

arrived but for us' and who will believe the Minister who spoke so quietly and convincingly that December Sunday in Comacchio?"

Whether these claims on the part of the Communists were justified is not in point nor are we concerned with the actual nature of the reforms contemplated. The incident is recited because it illustrates what is happening in most parts of the world to-day where the landlessness and the poverty of the people go together as cause and effect. The Communists turn these conditions to their political advantage and make their specious promises to the people who in their distress are prepared to listen to anything, only to find themselves in a state of slavery even worse than before. As we watch the great upheaval in so many countries we see the real allies of the Communists in the defenders of things as they are, the vested interests in privilege and monopoly who will not or cannot recognise the equal rights of all to the use of land, and who in their apathy, their hostility and intransigence make the State the engine for their power to hold the people in bondage. As a correspondent has written us, we shall never combat Communism by force, which appears to be the only thing the Western Powers can think of; and in that, the Western Powers are largely responsible for the present state of world affairs. In every single case where backward peoples have tried to improve their conditions, they have backed the privileged classes against the workers, just because in their estimation the private appropriation of the rent of land dare not be challenged. They will not allow the uprooting of that institution; and condemned both to futility and disaster are all the schemes they are evolving for the sending of aids and subventions on the lines of the Colonial Development Fund of our Government and the notorious "Point Four" policy of President Truman. These Governments would heavily tax their own citizens to send supplies abroad which in the circumstances of the *receiving countries*, where proprietorship of land is a private privilege, result in the one finality—an increase in the rent and price of land and the perpetuation if not the aggravation of the poverty of the people whom it was sought to benefit.

A. W. M.