

estate agent prospectus of Grimsbury as a 'new Jericho' (referring to the Oxford canal-side community endowed by industry, the OUP, Thomas Hardy and Morse) may never be realised but, as everywhere, there is history, less in buildings than in the residents and passers by.

By origin, however, the core of the newly emerging Grimsbury indicates a significant democratic movement, which seems increasingly distant in an age where the right to vote is hardly recognised as an asset.

'Only in Britain did the great events of 1846 fail to inspire mass uprising. In E.P. Thompson's hopeful phrase, Great Britain "trembled on the brink of Revolution". However, in spite of this exaggerated view of events, it did not happen'.<sup>4</sup>

What did happen was a quiet, largely middle-class, progress towards wider political involvement, which, in country towns, was reflected in property.

'The development which most epitomised the ethos of Liberal Banbury was New Grimsbury, originally called Freetown. Early in 1851 an audience of 300 heard James Taylor of Birmingham lecture in Banbury on Freehold Land Societies. Taylor was a disciple of the Unitarian minister George Dawson, and a zealous crusader for working-class self-help. The principle of a freehold land society was that members should subscribe to buy land at wholesale prices, and distribute building plots among themselves at the same price. By creating freeholds, such societies extended the franchise in county constituencies, but Taylor denies that such consequences had a party objective.'<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this paper, which was largely prepared in report form as part of the documentation for Conservation Area designation, is to begin to uncover the Freehold movement and to illustrate Banbury's place in a national wave of home-building which still lacks any comprehensive review or text. It is largely, therefore, a statement of research required, rather than delivered.

Grimsbury and other Freehold areas elsewhere have come of age in the past twenty years. Properties in decline have been retrieved through planning intervention, and their character, size and location have found increasing favour with a new generation of residents. They represent one of the earliest stages of residential design to be regarded as townscape groupings, rather than architecture, and current interest shows how a broader concern for local and family history have widened public responsibility for urban architecture.

---

<sup>4</sup> Hughes-Wilson, John: *The Puppet Masters*, London: Cassell, 2004, p.208.

<sup>5</sup> Trinder, Barrie: *Victorian Banbury*, Chichester, Phillimore; BHS 19, 1982, p.99.