

## The Freehold Movement

The historical literature on Freehold agitation is extensive. The use of land ownership as a political tool to increase the number of voters and to effect change probably has several originators.

Townley<sup>6</sup> notes the roles of the Chartist leader Fergus O'Connor and of Richard Cobden, one of the leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League.

In the late 1840's and early 1850's a series of freehold land societies was formed. The first was started in Birmingham in 1847 by James Taylor (Junior) (1814-87) who had emerged as a national Temperance leader in 1840. By the end of 1847 he had assisted the formation of six independent societies – Dudley, Stourbridge, Coventry, Worcester, Wolverhampton and Stafford. With Birmingham they comprised 2108 members with 2837 shares. By December 1852 there were 130 societies with 85,000 members with 120,000 shares, 310 estates and 19,500 allotted freeholds.

According to *The Freeholder*, the movement's monthly newspaper published from January 1850 (later monthly as *The Freehold Land Times*), it is clear that Taylor was touring the country, possibly focusing on counties where the balance of political parties was so nearly equal that the addition of a few hundred voters would turn the scale for the Liberal cause.

There was an inevitable reaction – in 1850 a Birmingham Conservative, John Merridrew, warned of the political danger in a tract, noting that Birmingham Conservatives had responded by forming the Victoria Freehold Land, Building and Investment Society.

As a result of growing publicity (further Freehold schemes had been established in Carlisle, Burton on Trent, Burslem and Ipswich) Banbury worthies visited Birmingham to learn the details of the schemes.

In early February 1851 a public meeting of some 300 people was held at Crouch Street British School, Banbury to hear James Taylor, the Birmingham preacher, 'a zealous young non-conformist' who wanted to be part of any 'new crusade in the cause of working-class self-help.'

(This 'self-help' is, perhaps, best expressed in a report in the *Illustrated London News* of an 1850 meeting in Woolwich (!) to promote the Westminster Freehold Land Society at which a Mr J. Duncan:

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<sup>6</sup> Townley, Chas.: 'Kidderminster's Revolutionaries: The Development of Land Clubs and Building Societies in Victorian Kidderminster,' 2007.  
(Online) Retrieved 6:11:2007 from <http://www.uplands->