

To whom belongs the land: Change and Reform on a North Riding Estate 1889 to 1914.

Brandsby and Stearsby lie at the foot of the Howardian Hills, in the North Riding, roughly on a line between the towns of Easingwold and Hovingham. They already formed one manor at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086, then consisting of land for six ploughs, farmed by six households.¹ The Cholmeleys held Brandsby from the mid 1500s to the death of Hugh Fairfax-Cholmeley in 1940. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as farming requirements moved from subsistence to farming for profit, the estate was developed into farms. In 1746, it consisted of eight good-sized farms and fourteen smaller farms and smallholdings.² During the rest of the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries, farming was profitable on the estate and it provided a good income for the Cholmeleys. In the later 19th century income from the estate gradually declined, partly as a result of the changing economics of farming and partly from inadequate management. Hugh Charles Fairfax-Cholmeley inherited the estate in April 1889, when he was 25 years old. He was squire for 51 years until his death in April 1940. This is the story of the reform programme he implemented from 1889 up to 1914 through the debate

¹ <http://www.domesdaybook.co.uk/northriding.html>, National Archives' reference E 31/2/2/6235.

² *Map of Brandsby Estate 1746, Francis Cholmeley Esq.*, Cholmeley archive, Northallerton Records Office.

about land reform which became a significant part of English party political struggle in the years from 1880 to 1914 and in a climate of diminishing agricultural returns. During that time the sleepy village of Brandsby became an example of progress. He continued to work in the service of agricultural reform in Brandsby and district up to his death in 1940 at the age of 76 through times of increasing hardship.

The state of agriculture and the Brandsby and Stearsby estate in 1889.

In 1875 British farmers had been producing about half the wheat and six-sevenths of the meat eaten in Britain; wheat prices were high and stock fetched good prices in the markets. Farm rents were buoyant. But from 1875, the fortunes of agriculture in Britain went into decline, prices started to drop; wheat which fetched 55 shillings a quarter in 1870-4, fell to 28 shillings in 1895-9. There were bad rains and a succession of poor harvests in the 1870s, together with foot-and-mouth disease and liver-rot in stock; British farmers were undercut by foreign competitors. Developments in the US – the building of railways, use of steamships and the combine harvester - meant that grain poured in from America. From 1880 steamships also brought refrigerated meat and butter from New Zealand. Produce such as bacon and butter also came to Britain from entrepreneurial countries in Northern Europe. Income from wood fell, as the navy demand for heavy wood for shipbuilding declined, and supplies of lighter wood for pit props and wicker baskets was arriving from Scandinavia.³ Agricultural depression meant falling incomes for farmers and falling rents for landlords.

³ Hill, C.P., *British Economic and Social History 1700-1975*, London, 1977, pp. 94-98.

This was also a time when Land Reform was high on the political agenda. During Fairfax-Cholmeley's lifetime the traditional and established order of landed aristocracy and gentry, which had made good economic and political sense, and which had fostered social cohesion for several centuries, as described in F.M.L Thompson's seminal account of landed society, was breaking and cracking.⁴ The drain of agricultural labour to the towns and emigration, and the declining profits from farming, upset its economics and income from land declined dramatically. This article is a case study of the social reforms Fairfax-Cholmeley implemented against the background of the debate on Land Reform.

During the good times for British farming, in the late 18th and first half of the 19th centuries the Brandsby Estate did well under three successive Squires all called Francis Cholmeley, all of whom were enterprising agriculturalists, one being particularly noted as an agricultural improver.⁵ During this period Brandsby Hall and Church were built and the current village. But a period of poor management and the onset of agricultural depression meant that by the time Captain Thomas Cholmeley, Fairfax-Cholmeley's father, inherited the estate in 1876, income from farm rents was declining, while the estate carried mortgages and entail obligations. Low prices and lower rents meant there was little to invest in improving the land and land quality deteriorated. This downward spiral of deterioration was not unique to Brandsby, but was general throughout Britain. During his few years as squire, Thomas made some improvements to cottages, but

⁴ Thompson, F.M.L., *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, London 1971.

⁵ He was referred to as such by Arthur Young (1741-1820) in his *Six Months Tour through the North of England* of 1770; from Papers of HCFC, Set A.

otherwise just kept the estate ticking over.

Captain Thomas died in April 1889 leaving any money and assets outside the Brandsby estate to his wife Rosalie and his younger children. This meant that Fairfax-Cholmeley inherited around 3200 acres of land, Brandsby Hall and Gilling Castle, but no liquid assets. The estate was mortgaged to the tune of £33,000 and also carried ‘entail’ obligations for the support of various family members. Fairfax-Cholmeley inherited a house, Brandsby Hall, and an estate in need of investment, but no liquid assets and a declining income. From early in his tenure, Fairfax-Cholmeley recognised that the days of the gentry living in style off the land were over. Change was coming, engineered or not. Generally, in Britain the years 1888 to 1940 were, with a few small upturns, ones of ever-worsening agricultural depression. But it was not just economic pressure which fuelled Fairfax-Cholmeley’s desire for renovation and reform, he was already committed to social reform, through ideas he initially got at Oxford, and through practical engagement in the East End of London.

From squire to social reformer

By the time, Fairfax-Cholmeley came into the estate he had a strong belief in social reform and a desire to overturn “the old order”⁶. Being the son of a Catholic family, Hugh’s schooling had not been with his peers, but at Oscott, an education which he later

⁶ Own words, HCFC Memoirs.

derided as inadequate. At that time Catholics were barred by their Church from attending Anglican public schools and from Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The result of this was that the Roman Catholic upper class were culturally, educationally and socially disadvantaged.⁷ However, Fairfax-Cholmeley's mother, who was a convert, obtained a dispensation from the bishop to allow Fairfax-Cholmeley to attend Oxford, a move which despite his self-avowed efforts to avoid philosophical and theological discussion, in order to preserve his faith, brought him into acquaintance with men whose new ideas he admired.⁸ It was at Oxford that he became acquainted with the idea of settlements in the East End of London, aimed at social and moral reform. When he left Christ Church college in 1877 he took up an invitation to enter the Toynbee Hall Settlement, which had opened in 1885 by Canon Samuel Barnett.

The publication of a pamphlet on poverty in East London, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* in 1883, revealed conditions as "...a vast mass of moral corruption, of heat-breaking misery and absolute godlessness...". It thereafter became a hub of reformist endeavours. Toynbee Hall had as its ethos a particular brand of social reform, one of several propounded in the 1880s. It was an ethos, emanating from the Oxford philosophers T. H Green and Arnold Toynbee, founded on ideas of leadership to replace class hierarchies and on mutually dependent community. Though Barnett was a Church of England vicar, he welcomed people of all denominations and none, and he did not allow the settlement to proselytise religion. There were many other Christian

⁷ McClelland, V. A., *Cardinal Manning: His Public Life and Influence 1865-92*, London 1962. Chapter 1 has a good discussion on how Roman Catholic society in Britain was particularly unprepared and closed to ideas of social reform.

⁸ HCFC Dairy.

settlements; the Evangelicals sort to convert the poor and the Tractarians called them to worship, but Barnett sought shared experience and community.⁹

It was there that Fairfax-Cholmeley became acquainted with poverty and its spirit crushing nature which leads to moral and spiritual degeneration. He also gained practical experience of social reform. Through his work there with boys' clubs and education he came to believe that, through a healthy social environment and activities, life experience could be totally changed. Despite Barnett's emphasis on community and sharing, the Toynbee vision remained hierarchical, the residents there being thought of as urban squires. Fairfax-Cholmeley and three of his friends, Hubert Llewellyn Smith, A.P. Laurie and A.G. Rogers in an attempt to escape the confines of class, formed their own settlement called *The Swarm*, in a house in Mile End, through which they ran a boys club and founded the *Whitechapel School of Handicraft*, which taught crafts to poor boys and later also to girls. It became an important East End social institution up to the first World War. It was in this melting pot at Toynbee and here in Mile End, that Fairfax-Cholmeley built his networks of like-minded associates. and explored the many different ideas being propounded on how society could be reformed. His reading material included Charles Kingsley and William Thackeray among others, but the works of John Ruskin and Edward Carpenter became his guiding references. He later visited Carpenter and stayed in touch with him and Ruskin's Guild of St. George in Sheffield. In later years he served as President of the Guild.¹⁰

⁹ Briggs, A., and Macartney, A., *Toynbee Hall: The first Hundred Years*, London, 1984, p.2-27. Briggs addresses the history:

Meacham, S., *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform 1880-1914*, London, 1987, explores its ethos.

¹⁰ HCFC Memoirs.

At one point Fairfax-Cholmeley was approached by Cardinal Manning, the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, already renowned for his work in social reform. Manning lamented much the absence of any Catholic names in any of the important reform movements of the time and would have been very keen to be able to recruit someone from one of England's old Catholic families, to help establish his Catholic brand of reform. However, by that time, Fairfax-Cholmeley had become committed to his own ideas on practical socialism, i.e. reform based in practice and was determined to steer clear of any brand of clerical direction, even from his own Church.¹¹

In the East End he also became involved with the Dockers Union, assisting with relief work during the Great Dock Strike of 1889. After this he spent some months in the Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire countryside, with a union activist called Ben Nicholls, walking and canvassing in the villages to promote the Agricultural Labourers' Union, which was then in the course of a brief revival.¹² So, by the time Fairfax-Cholmeley came into the Brandsby estate, the rigid social order of the countryside, seemed repugnant to him. He drew on the friendships and connections he had made in London to support him in his reforms in Brandsby; they were crucial to helping him sustain his resolve.

¹¹ The history of the Catholic Church in England casts further light on why Fairfax-Cholmeley did not feel able to exercise his reforming career within his own Faith. That he acted outside of it, made for difficulties within his own family, but he felt that hitching his cause to the Church would impede his ability carry out the work he intended to do. Accounts of his life in London are from his own papers.

¹² HCFC Memoirs.

Condition of the estate in 1889

In 1889, the Brandsby estate consisted of twelve farms and five smallholdings. The farmers were mostly tenants of long standing, two of the families having been there for more than 150 years. All the tenants bar one had capital; they farmed in the old fashioned way and for the most part kept their land in reasonably good condition, though three farms were in a very poor state.

“There was, however, great despondency about agricultural prospects and the farmers had completely lost heart. The tenants had been good farmers in their time, but they were not to be taught new ways and were sufficiently well off not to care to disturb their old age by innovations and experiments involving a change of policy and of the habits of a lifetime. Their one panacea was a rise in the price of corn, and their method of coping with the situation was economy in the labour bill. Landlords and farmers all round were pursuing the same course and endeavouring to meet their difficulties by economy instead of by resorting to new methods. The result was a visible tendency for the farms to deteriorate through being less carefully kept. Hedges and ditches were not attended to so well as they should be, and on some farms the cultivation itself showed signs of

degeneration.”¹³

On Low Farm, the corn was so poor it did not come up to the knees if you walked through it and on Seaves Farm some of the pasture was so poor it was said it “would not keep a goose to an acre”. Thornhill and Seaves were almost derelict and probably unlettable. Hugh estimated that about 600 acres of his best land was on the margins of cultivation through these three farms. Many of the buildings on all the farms were also poor and badly arranged for modern farming..

In Brandsby village, there were 14 cottages, all unsatisfactory. There was not one house or cottage on the estate with proper foundations or any damp proofing. Most had roofs too low to provide adequate bedroom space. Sanitary arrangements were shared middens, either at the end of rows or out the back. Water in the village came from a tiny dip well or from a spring in the field below the Dale cottages. Besides the unsatisfactory shared earth closets and middens and poor access to water, all were unhealthy by reason of cramped space, draughts, damp or all three.

Despite all this, Hugh says that the condition of the Brandsby estate compared favourably with some surrounding estates. Cottagers were able to have an allotment strip on which to grow vegetables and in lieu of common land, there was a field at Barfield for which they

¹³ HCFC Memoirs.

could pay a “cow gate” to enable them to pasture a cow. They could also rent “haypieces”. On many estates, following the enclosure of the common lands, cottagers had no access to any land which they could use. The value Fairfax-Cholmeley placed on this is shown in that in 1889 he had his architect/ artist friend Alfred Powell draw up a map of the Brandsby village allotments.

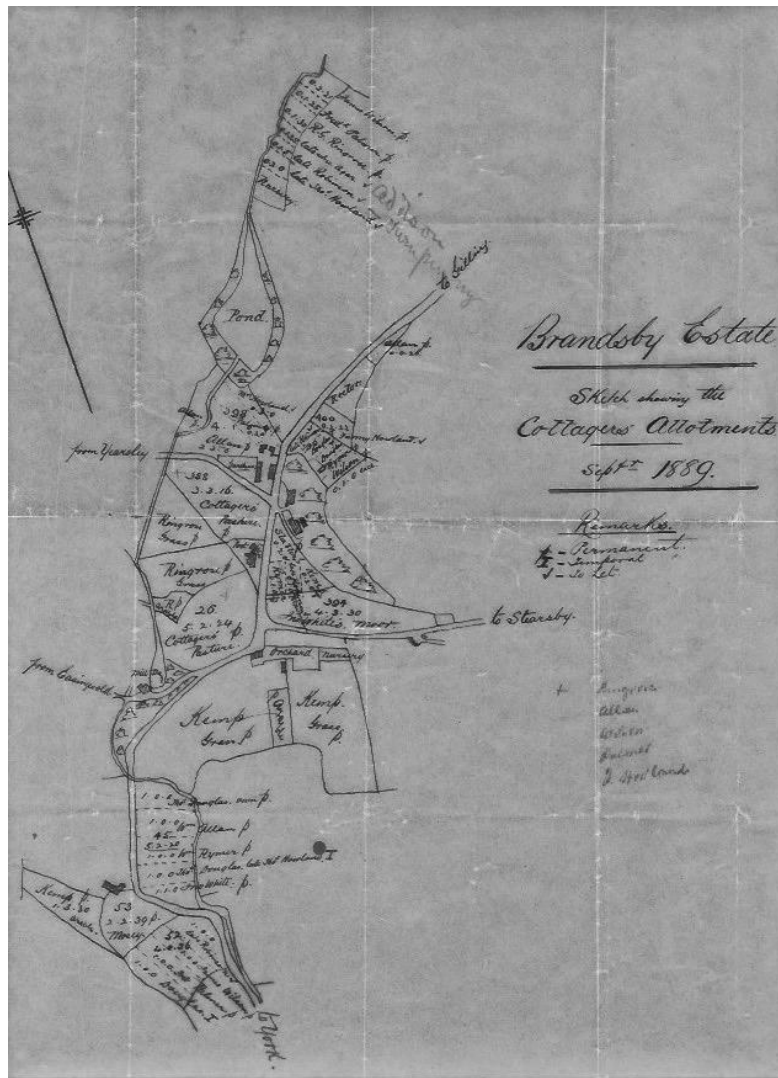


Figure 1: Allotments map, drawn by Alfred Powell, architect.

(HCFC, author)

Labourers on the estate lived either in tied cottages or with the family of the farmer for whom they worked. They worked from 6am to 6pm or from dawn to dusk when the days were short, six full days a week. On Sundays they were expected to attend church. They had no holidays except when a day was specifically applied for and for which they had to forego a day's pay. Wages were fifteen or sixteen shillings a week; there was no overtime. Though they could have an allotment, it was very difficult for them to find the time to cultivate their own plots. There were no social facilities of any kind in the village, no hall, no cricket ground, no reading room, just one pub at Stearsby.¹⁴

The problems of farming on Hugh's estate echoed general farming conditions in Britain at the time. Farmers typically had no knowledge of modern methods and scientific innovations were treated with scorn. Farmers and agents alike were ignorant of the benefit of fertilisers or how to use them, depending instead on keeping large herds of cattle to provide manure. They knew nothing about the quality of cow cake, or about new systems of crop rotation to improve the land. They relied entirely on hopes of the Government imposing tariffs on imports to increase wheat prices, and on economising on labour. Landlords maintained they could not afford to build or invest, owing to falling rents. Farmers did little to improve their land for fear of attracting a rent rise. Agents usually had little knowledge of farming. Investment in new methods or resources was

¹⁴ HCFC Memoirs.

unheard of. Edwin Pratt, who surveyed agricultural methods in Northern Europe, Ireland and Canada in 1905 made the point that other countries had reorganised and modernised their agriculture and taken advantage of innovations like rail transport to bring down costs. England and Wales were backward with regard to improved methods of agricultural production, practical organisation and national infrastructure and were vulnerable to cheaper foreign imports .¹⁵

The tenure of the land

Behind the need to regenerate and improve farming practices which faced Fairfax-Cholmeley, ran the ongoing debate on the tenure of the land. In the 1880s land owning interests still held sway in parliament through the House of Lords, but agrarian issues were becoming more and more important in constituency politics.¹⁶ After the Third Reform Act of 1884 extended the franchise to large numbers of rural labourers, the importance of winning rural votes increased dramatically and the rural land issue became a significant part of English party political struggle up to 1914, particularly in Liberal Party policies.¹⁷

¹⁵ Pratt, E.A., *The Organisation of Agriculture*, London, 1905, pp.9-10.

¹⁶ Readman, P., *Land and Nation in England: patriotism, national identity, and the politics of land, 1880-1914.*, London, 2008, p.1.

¹⁷ Packer, I., *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land*, Bury St Edmunds, 2001, p.2.

But, as Readman recounts, even the Conservative government under Lord Salisbury found it necessary to create a Board of Agriculture in 1889, and there were numerous rural reform acts during the 1880s and 90s.¹⁸ These included a Bill for the formation of County Councils in 1888, Agricultural Holding Acts of 1880 and 1886, to improve the rights of tenant farmers, greatly enhanced by the Liberal's Act of 1906 and in 1886 the Agricultural Land Ratings Act which reduced rates by half. The Tories' Allotment Extension Acts of 1882 and 1890 didn't really get any bite until the Liberals Act of 1908 which gave powers of compulsory purchase of land to County Councils. The Local Government Act of 1894 which provided for the formation of Parish Councils. All these were significant changes during this time.

According to Michael Tichelar, a major objective of the 'land question' was to reduce the disproportionate power of and influence of aristocratic landowners.¹⁹ Fairfax-Cholmeley was in accord with this, disliking heartily the tyranny of life governed by the Squire and the Parson and the unrewarded drudgery of a labourer's life as he found it in 1888. Despite the revival of 1889, in which Fairfax-Cholmeley had been involved, agricultural unionism failed and social revolution in the countryside became an intellectual ideal in the towns.²⁰ As will be seen in later discussion Fairfax-Cholmeley contributed significantly to trying to improve understanding of country and agricultural issues in policy makers; Liberals though well meaning did not understand country issues,

¹⁸ Readman, op. cit.

¹⁹ Tichelar, M., *The Failure of Land Reform in Twentieth-Century England*, New York, 2019.

²⁰ Newby, H., *Country Life*, London, 1987, pp. 138-9.

the Tories did, but being dominated by landowners were normally against change or reform.

In the 1890s some of Fairfax-Cholmeley's contribution to the debate on land management and agricultural affairs as is recorded in newspaper reports. He was well aware that the interests of landowners, farmers and labourers were not all the same and often in conflict, as was demonstrated in that after the 1906 Act which was welcomed by farmers, there was a mass defection of Liberal landowners to the Unionist party.²¹ In 1893 he opposed a motion at a conference of the National Agricultural Union in London, which urged all landowners, tenant farmers and labourers to join and support the National Agricultural Union in order to promote their common interests. This motion was tabled by Lord Winchilsea, a Tory politician noted for his work as a patron of agricultural improvement. Hugh believed that such a central organisation would be dominated by the views of landowners, to the detriment of the other classes. What was needed, he argued, was a federation of county and other local associations, with a central administrative council. Despite being heckled he declared

"...that he would be no party to making the agricultural programme the cat's-paw of the landed interest, and propping up a discredited system of a decaying squirearchy.(Laughter and cheers)"

His ally in rural affairs Robert Yerburgh MP, attended, but only three hands went up for the amendment and the motion was passed unamended. In a further letter on the debate to the *London Chronicle*, Fairfax-Cholmeley went on to say that he was now inclined to

²¹ Packer, op.cit.

think that the interests of the country would be best served

“...if we reduced the landlord to the position of a land-agent, and allowed him the salary which he now pays his land-agent on condition that he properly managed the estate he had in charge.”²²

In 1896 he delivered a paper at Easingwold Agricultural Club on *“The Tenure of the Land”*, claiming that Government was very badly informed on agricultural matters, looking on land questions with a landowner’s eye and, however well-meaning its policies were, it was drifting along without any definite goal in view.. He maintained that depreciation of agricultural rent is a loss to the country as a whole and what was needed was the best system of managing the land to preserve its value. He posed two system, one a system of peasant proprietorship, as in France and the other retention of the estate system, but with compulsorily required good management and administration. The first had the disadvantage of shortage of capital and the second that of currently poor administration. The estate system if well managed had all the advantages of a large business, but currently needed drastic reforms, including state control of landlords, to ensure they managed their land effectively for the nation. Generally well-managed estates had a better standard of buildings, houses and general comfort. Tenants and labourers flocked to well-managed estates. Ownership of rent was not the crucial factor, he maintained, what was important was good administration.. Hugh concluded by saying that he was not promoting one system over the other, but presenting them both for

²² *Yorkshire Gazette*, ‘Mr H. Fairfax Cholmeley on the “Squirearchy”’, 9 Dec1893.

consideration.²³

However, Liberal Party policies crystallised into two main policies, the demand for land taxation, which Lloyd George brought into his 1909 Budget and the demand for smallholdings and allotments.²⁴ Like all landowners, Fairfax-Cholmeley feared land taxation, but did not oppose the policy, but rather spent his energies in arguing that the Bill should be formulated so that what was taxed was unearned increments, as when land price increases when sold for building, but improvements in value resulting from good farming practices should not be taxed.²⁵

Though he had reservations about the wisdom of dismantling working farms to create smallholdings, he supported the Liberal government 1907 Smallholdings Act. On his own estate, smallholdings already existed and he was always careful to ensure that he let land to people who had the ability to farm it. But he did a lot of work locally in trying to ensure good implementation of the Act. This is recorded in a set of letters which he wrote to Captain Mark Sykes of Sledmere between April 1908 and December 1911²⁶. These letters are devoted to the furtherance of the Yorkshire Agricultural Small Holders Association (YASHA) as a non-party committee to act as brokers to ensure the development of economically viable small

²³ *York Herald*, "Easingwold Agricultural Club Meeting, 'The Tenure of the Land'", 12 Dec 1896.

²⁴ Tichelar, op.cit.

²⁵ Fairfax-Cholmeley personal papers. There is a considerable amount about his negotiations in accounts of his work with the Agricultural Organisation Society from 1901. By his own account he appears to have been successful in achieving this.

²⁶ A series of 58 letters to Mark Sykes from Hugh Fairfax-Cholmeley, in papers of the Sykes Estate, Hull History Centre Archive, April 1908 to December 1911.

holdings in Yorkshire. Fairfax-Cholmeley sought out Mark Sykes as an influential Conservative; he wanted the committee to be an inter-party one, focused on practical action, rather than on Liberal politics, though he and the existing committee were initially all Liberals.

Besides illustrating the amount of work he put into promoting good working of the Smallholdings Act, these letters show that since his speech on the subject of Land Tenure of 1896, he had come to the conclusion that the land was better managed by good and able landowners who knew about agriculture and knew their own land and tenants, than it would be by a retreat into individualism. He argues for landlords to act to prove the usefulness of their existence as administrators and managers of their estates. Fairfax-Cholmeley's reform programme and his life's work at Brandsby demonstrates this in action, where he used his position as landowner to improve and nurture both the land and the people who lived on it.

Practical reform 1889 to 1914

In this context Hugh Fairfax-Cholmeley set about social and agricultural reforms in Brandsby. His first project the Reading Room is worth describing in detail, because it formed a template for his method for getting his later projects going.

The Reading Room Project

When a cottage at the end of the Highside cottages fell vacant. Instead of re-letting it, Fairfax-Cholmeley decided to turn it into a Reading Room. To this end, he send word around the estate via Hanson, his bailiff, to invite all who were able to come to a meeting in the cottage one evening at 8pm. About 15 men gathered for the meeting, standing nervously around the walls, as Hugh describes them: three farmers, the postmaster, the joiners and a few labourers from the village. Hugh was equally nervous, this being the first time he had addressed the people of Brandsby. He outlined his proposal and called on the meeting to elect a committee.

Though sufficient numbers agreed to his proposal at the meeting, it was very difficult to keep this early venture on the road. There was great opposition from the Rector, the Reverend Swann, and the farmers. It was said it wouldn't work and that there was no call for it. Even some committee members spoke against it around the village. Farmers objected that it would keep their labourers out late in the evenings, though interestingly, this same objection did not appear to apply to the pub at Stearsby. The Swanns spent much time canvassing the village to advise people to have nothing to do with it.

Though Fairfax-Cholmeley had insisted on the election of a committee, he had to work hard to keep this together and had to attend all meetings himself, often returning from London specially, to ensure that discord did not take over and that the men did not become dispirited.

“The committee was allowed to make bylaws so long as they kept within the constitutional rules. I worked from the the beginning with the intention of gradually developing complete self-government. The subscription was to be 1/- per quarter and it was to be open to all residents in the parish who cared to join and subscribe to the rules.”

“When they could not dissuade me they tried by every means they could devise to prevent the men from using the room. What threats could not accomplish, bribes and intrigues attempted to accomplish, and finally when the men still came to the room, Swann’s coachman was sent to create discord among the members and to report our proceedings.”²⁷

Hugh subscribed £1 for the first year, supplied some books and a socialist newspaper, *The Star*. When it got this far, the Rev. Swann, horrified by the socialist papers to which Hugh was exposing the villagers, rushed down and subscribed the conservative *Yorkshire Post*. The Club took the *Yorkshire Herald* at its own expense. He also kept the men together by organising occasional ‘singsongs’ and lectures given by one or other of his London friends. As will all his ventures, Fairfax-Cholmeley thought the social and community side was as important as education.

²⁷ HCFC Memoirs.

His method for all his projects remained substantially the same: get a committee elected; provide a small amount of seed funding, an initial set of rules and accommodation or other resource from the estate. Then, though the committee was supposed to be self-governing, he watched over them carefully until they were well established, warding off ever-present opposition. The work he put in establishing the Reading Room formed the basis of this method.

In 1892 or 1893, in order to progress the social side of the Reading Room Club, Fairfax-Cholmeley decided to hold a dance. He lent the drawing room of the Hall, got donations of food from the farmers, canvassed the villagers and held country dancing practice sessions. His mother, Rosalie, played the piano. Tickets cost 1/- and only members of the Club could get them, but they could each invite one lady. There were no complimentary tickets, to the annoyance of some who felt they were entitled to one. The evening was a great success, to the surprise of some, despite the absence of alcohol. Membership of the Reading Room Club rose. For a while the dances became an annual event and were emulated in some of the surrounding villages: tickets were much sought after and Hugh felt these dances really heartened the men.

In 1892 among the regular circulation of visitors from London to Brandsby came J.J. Dent, Secretary of the Working Men's Club Association. On his advice, Hugh affiliated the Reading Room Club to the Working Men's Club & Institute Union (CIU) giving it more status and support. It was also in the 1890s that Hugh had a cricket ground laid out in the village recreation field and thereafter Brandsby Cricket Week became an essential

part of the village yearly calendar. Family members including, after 1903, Hugh's wife Alice, helped with the cricket teas. A wooden building to serve as a pavilion was built.



Figure 2: Cricket Week at Brandsby: painting by Fr. Raphael Williams, showing the still existing village hall and the now disappeared pavilion.

(Photo: Author, courtesy of Brigid Howard)

Improving working conditions

In the early 1890s Fairfax-Cholmeley reduced the hours of his estate workers. They were to start work at 7am and to finish by 6pm or dusk, whichever was earlier and Saturdays were reduced to a half day. This challenge to the established norms of labourers'

employment aroused enormous opposition in the neighbourhood, not just on his own estate. He was said to be “spoiling” his workers. Fairfax-Cholmeley overcame his foreman’s objections by telling him that if it were necessary to have a labourer work all day Saturday or later in the evenings, he would have to be paid overtime. The foreman’s horror at the idea of paying a labourer overtime silenced his protests over shorter hours. Fairfax-Cholmeley also raised the workers’ wages. One of his workers said that the difference the adjustment of hours made to his family life was wonderful. Previously, during the winter he did not see his children at all, except on Sundays. In addition he was now able to cultivate his allotment on Saturday afternoons.²⁸

Renewing the housing stock

Around the same time in 1890 Fairfax-Cholmeley started improving the housing stock. He raised the roofs of the Highside cottages, creating useable bedroom space. He made other improvements to get rid of damp, and built earth closets to replace the middens at the back. Bit by bit he improved all the existing village cottages to make them healthier places in which to live.

His first new-build project was a “cottage” for himself in the village at Mill Hill. This was a co-operative venture between himself and his friends in the newly emerging Arts and Crafts movement. It embodied his idea of ‘the simple life’ in the mode advocated by

²⁸HCFC Memoirs.

the contemporary socialist and philosopher, Edward Carpenter. The architect was Detmar Blow of the Arts & Crafts movement: it was Blow's first house. After his marriage in 1903, the house was extended and in 1912 Alfred Powell (another Arts & Crafts architect and lifelong friend) designed extensive additions and gave it its very attractive frontage. This 'cottage' also embodied his ideals of community; whereas Brandsby Hall stood in grandeur in its own parkland, Mill Hill was sited in the village.

Liberal party politics were informed, not just by economics but ideas of 'social democratic collectivism' as expressed by L.T.Hobhouse, with who Fairfax-Cholmeley was acquainted. Herbert Samuel, another of his acquaintances said that Waterloo was won not on the playing fields of Eaton, but on the village greens of England'. Regeneration of rural life was tied up with ideas of national identity; Fairfax-Cholmeley's regeneration of his village was informed by these ideals as much as by economics.²⁹

With these aims in view, he set about his first attempts at new cottage building producing two cottages at Barfield to house the carpenter and the mason, both of whom he had recruited from Saltburn on the recommendation of the architect Philip Webb in 1892 or 1893. Again, the architect was Blow.³⁰ To stick to his resolve on this venture took courage; he was ridiculed for using an architect for cottages and for spending so much on

²⁹ Readman, op.cit., pp.72-158, 210, 210.

³⁰ Fairfax-Cholmeley's involvement with the emerging Arts and Crafts movement is discussed in Michael Drury's *The Wandering Architects: in pursuit of an Arts and Crafts ideal*, 1988 and also Barrie and Wendy Armstrong's *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Yorkshire - a Handbook*, 1913.

foundations and damp-proofing, not to mention good quality materials. The result was a pair of excellent cottages, but which even Fairfax-Cholmeley soon acknowledged were too grand and too expensive for their original purpose, but they made a great addition to the housing stock of the village. Later, he converted these cottages into a house for his brother Willie.

His first renovation of farm buildings was in a similar idealistic mode: he tackled the fold yard and sheds at the then dilapidated Low Farm with the aid of Detmar Blow. These still stand, though modifications have been made to take account of how the farm works today.

The building of new cottages was a problem for landowners, most saying it was not economically possible to build them on the declining income from their estates. This problem was dealt with in Section III of the Liberal Party's policy statement *Towards a Social Policy*, published by The Speaker. The committee which wrote this document included H.C.Fairfax-Cholmeley and his friends C.R. Buxton, L.T.Hobhouse and Vaughan Nash and Fairfax-Cholmeley's voice comes through particularly clearly in the cottage proposals. It was proposed that a good cottage could be built for £150 and would attract a rent of 3/- a week. The point is made that a labourer who holds his cottage from his employer is not likely to agitate for increased wages. The document argues for County Councils to be enabled to compulsorily purchase land to build houses with 1 to 5 acres attached, to enable the labourer to increase his wages. It was proposed that if a landlord cannot, as he alleges, provide the capital for cottage building, he could be

required to provide the site with sufficient land to augment wages, to enable the County Council to build the cottages.³¹

Fairfax-Cholmeley produced his own detailed plan for building good quality cottages for around £150 each. He had spent a lot of time visiting cottages on his estate and noting their shortcomings. Chief among his design considerations were: adequate damp-proofing; space for three bedrooms; and a sitting room which was apart from the general living space to enable cottagers to receive visitors and also to lay out the dead with dignity. Hugh's design attended to the questions of draughts and ventilation, the siting of fireplaces and boiler to maximise the use of heat generated, the safety and pleasing proportions of staircases and the functions of the scullery. An earth closet and coal house were included. He favoured building cottages in pairs, with a dividing wall between the cottages to separate the back-yard space. This arrangement, he felt maximised heat retention in the cottages and provided neighbourliness, without the social problems which came from building cottages in a row, with a common backyard area. Hugh drew up the design for these cottages himself, paying Alfred Powell £10 to draw up the staircase and the windows and doors to ensure the measurements were correct. Fairfax-Cholmeley's design was published in *The Builder* on 30th December 1905 under the name of "The Brandsby Model Cottage", following its presentation to the to the Annual meeting of the Rural Housing and Sanitation Association on 21st November 1905.³²

Fairfax-Cholmeley built his first two cottages from this design on Snargate farm, then

³¹ The Speaker Publishing, *Towards a Social Policy*, n.d. but prior to 1905.

³² R.H.S.A. Pamphlet in HCFC papers.

three at Stearsby, pulling down six hovels which had stood on the site. He built one cottage at Low Farm and in 1905 his final pair at Warren House Farm. Besides the living design, Fairfax-Cholmeley attended closely to the external appearance, following the Arts & Crafts principle of beauty and utility at all times, as can be seen in the pleasing lines of the windows and gables and the quality of materials used. This last pair cost a little over budget at £347 4s 7d for the pair.



Figure 3: Warren House cottages, built for a total of £347 4s 7d in 1905.

(author's photo 2017)

Though Fairfax-Cholmeley was well acquainted with the nearby Howard Estate, he was not impressed by cottages built there by the Radical Countess Rosalind Howard. He thought them too costly and grandiose in design with not enough thought of practical

use.³³ In 1897 Mr. Wood came to be his agent. Wood's sound knowledge of farming enabled Hugh to improve the rest of the farms and buildings, over the years, in an economical and practical way.

Brandsby water supply

In 1887 he extended the existing water supply for Brandsby Hall down into the village to provide a standpipe at the end of the cottage rows. He also organised the building of a bathhouse, in commemoration of the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, using his committee method outlined in the Reading Room project. Use of the bathhouse was free, but users had to provide their own soap and towels. He also extended the water supply to some of the farms. Both the bathhouse and the Village Hall, built in 1914, received water from the Brandsby supply at a nominal charge of 1/- a year.³⁴

The improvement of farming

Fairfax-Cholmeley first tackled this through education. Shortly after County Councils were instituted in 1889 he applied for an extension lecturer to come and give evening talks, loaning out the drawing room at Brandsby Hall for the purpose. Though these

³³ HCFC Memoirs.

³⁴ HCFC Memoirs;

Pratt, E.A., *The Transition in Agriculture*, London, 1906, Chapter "Brandsby Leads the Way".

lectures attracted a regular audience, as reported in the press³⁵, he thought the practical influence of these on farming methods in Brandsby was negligible. They had a very good lecturer, but the welcoming fire and tea at the Hall had a lot to do with the attraction and the objective of most of the farmers was to try to catch out the lecturer to prove that he actually knew nothing about practical farming. Fairfax-Cholmeley knew that something else was needed and he decided to start a co-operative.

The Farmers Co-operative

Fairfax-Cholmeley would have first encountered the cooperative movement at Toynbee Hall; the Cooperative Wholesale Society held their meetings there from 1887 and Toynbee worked with London Cooperators in a variety of ways with a particular emphasis on education.³⁶ But his Brandsby venture was inspired by a visit from a cousin, Willie Charleton, who had established a dairying cooperative, the Newark Dairy Ltd at Long Bennington, Lincolnshire. Accordingly, in 1895 Hugh decided to set up a dairy co-operative, a risky venture as dairy farming was not a big part of Brandsby farm practice. Farmers on the estate were invited to join, which meant a commitment to supply milk to the Association at the fixed price of 7½d per gallon. The Association would be jointly owned by the members. At the same time he partitioned off half of the coach house at Brandsby Hall and fitted it out as a dairy, with butter and cheese making facilities.

³⁵ *York Herald*, "The Principles of Manuring", 27 April 1893.

³⁶ Briggs, op.cit., pp. 45-46, 48.

As usual he received no local encouragement for this endeavour, all opinion being that the thing “would never work”, but as Hugh says, he “would not be put off”.³⁷ Sufficient members were found to make a start, a dairyman was recruited and milk separation, butter and cheese making commenced. Butter and milk were sold to small shops in York and Easingwold and the remainder to a dealer. The enterprise was anything but profitable: the accounts for the first three months showed a loss of £90, this despite the fact that Hugh paid for all the carting and clerical work, charged no rent for the building and had paid for all the fitting out of the dairy. During the next six months the loss increased by another £20. The amount the Association had to pay for milk was too high to enable it to make a profit on the butter and cheese it sold. Practical difficulties were also substantial. On one occasion the motor for the separator failed, and as the dairyman had left in a huff after not being able to extract higher wages, Fairfax-Cholmeley and others worked into the night to start it. In the end they borrowed the motor from the sawmill and the motor started at midnight, enabling them to separate and process the milk which had been there since 7pm.

Fairfax-Cholmeley subsidized the Association surreptitiously for many years by not charging rent for premises, providing estate workers to service requirements and adding the odd donation to the Association accounts, at the same time continuing to research how an agricultural co-operative could be made to work. He visited Ireland to learn from the successful Irish Agricultural Co-operative Association, and he persuaded the Brandsby board to employ a manager from Ireland with co-operative experience; this was

³⁷ HCFC Memoirs.

the turning point for the viability of the Brandsby co-operative and by 1900 the Association was more or less covering its own costs and its name was changed to the Brandsby & District Agricultural Trading Association, later known as BATA.

He and Willie Charleton participated in groups and associations in Britain supporting agricultural co-operatives. These resulted in the establishment in 1901 of the Agricultural Organisation Society (AOS), a non-party Westminster association, which became the Government arm for supporting the regeneration of agriculture in Britain from 1901 until 1923. BATA was the first co-operative society to be registered with the AOS.

The cattle cake scheme

Fairfax-Cholmeley soon thought of other functions for the cooperative other than dairy produce and turned his mind to the analysis of cattle cake. there were no recognised standards and farmers relied solely on the publicity of suppliers in their choice of products. Fairfax-Cholmeley learned how to identify a good quality product. He then negotiated with Richardson's & Co., the leading supplier in York, for them to supply BATA with cake, splitting the 2½% discount Richardson's normally got from the wholesalers with BATA. Reluctantly they agreed, but only after Hugh used the name of the AOS, telling them that this big organisation would bring them many other societies as customers. BATA cake was sold making much of its certified analysis of percentages of oils and albumoids and gradually farmers came to take pride in their ability to discuss the

composition of cattle cake.. AOS took up and disseminated the cattle cake scheme nationally.

Improving Communications

In 1897, Hugh succeeded in persuading the Parish Council to take advantage of a new concession offered by the Postmaster General with regard to rural telegraph services. The Post Office would install these provided that, if receipts did not reach £33 per annum, the Parish Council would guarantee to make up half the deficit from their own funds. There was fierce opposition. The Council finally gave way when Fairfax-Cholmeley reminded them that he had several years previously agreed to pay any increase in parish rates for his tenants, so they could not be out of pocket. Though £33 seemed a very large sum for such a small place, Fairfax-Cholmeley was confident of eventual success and the telegraph was installed. Farmers quickly realised the advantage of being able to access current market prices, business rapidly doubled and the deficit disappeared altogether.

“I afterwards heard a most amusing story from Strickland of how when the office was just opened, he went down to the telegraph for news about the price of potatoes, which at that moment were just at the top of the market. Outside the post office he found old Tom Radcliffe haranguing a small audience on the cursed folly of the innovation. They then fell to discussing whether to accept a present offer or hold on to their stocks of potatoes for a rise. Strickland disappeared into the post office and got a reply by telegram from Selby Market, which decided him

to sell at once, and having telegraphed his acceptance of the offer he had received that morning, to his merchant in York, he went out and told Radcliffe the news and how the telegraph had gained him £5 the first time he used it. Old Tom was always generous in acknowledging error - “That beats ow’t” he said, “we’re never too old to learn” and off he went a convert to my innovation.”

Following on from the telegraph, in about 1908 Hugh turned his mind to getting the telephone for Brandsby. Six private telephone lines were installed, but these were expensive. He persuaded the Postmaster General to agree to a pilot scheme for party lines for farmers. Again this was implemented through a mixture of cajoling and by himself paying for two of the lines to make up the minimum of 10 which the scheme required. Hugh reported that the benefits of the phone were immeasurable in terms of being able to get things done, and local farmers and businessmen soon came to depend on it. Even Mrs Swann, the rector’s wife, soon found it indispensable in her quest for gossip.³⁸ The scheme was taken up by the AOS and promoted to other rural communities.³⁹ Herbert Samuel, the Postmaster General, spoke on the scheme at some length in the House of Commons, praising the “unity is strength” spirit of Brandsby.⁴⁰

³⁸ HCFC Papers, Set C.

³⁹ AOS Annual Report 1909.

⁴⁰ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 22 May 1911.

The North Eastern Railway transport system

Next came the cost of goods transport for farmers. Fairfax-Cholmeley, with the aid of one of his old London associates A.G. Stevenson, then land agent for the North Eastern Railway (NER), got into discussion as to how the NER could assist agriculture. The NER Manager, Burt agreed to provide a shed at Tollerton station and a steam locomotive to transport goods. Hugh built a goods depot at Brandsby which he leased to the Co-operative. The railway authorities would have built the depot at Brandsby themselves, but Hugh wished to keep control of the transport under the Brandsby Co-operative.

In 1905 a grand opening ceremony was held with a luncheon in the goods depot. Frank Yerburgh MP, then President of the Agricultural Organisation Society, came to officiate, with guests including railway officials and many others and from 1904 two steam locomotives ran services twice a day from Brandsby first to Tollerton, then later via Stillington to Easingwold. The agricultural writer E.A. Pratt.



*Figure 4: Brandsby steam locomotive (E.A.Pratt, *The Transition in Agriculture*, 1906).*

included a chapter called “Brandsby shows the Way”, in his 1906 book. He was particularly impressed by the success of BATA and the transport scheme, tonnage was 89 tons to November of 1904, and increased to 285 tons by November 1905.⁴¹

The steam locomotive greatly increased the membership of the Co-operative, it also rapidly resulted in the opening of a BATA shop for household goods at Brandsby with another at Stillington. Initially, the buildings for the depot and shops were wooden sheds; Hugh had found a ‘recipe’ for building very robust sheds cheaply from a farmer in Northumberland. These same type of sheds were also used for the cricket pavilion and for the saw mill, when Hugh decided to move it from Brandsby Hall down into the village. The strength and endurance qualities of these sheds can be seen in that the Stillington

⁴¹ Pratt, E. A., *The Transition in Agriculture*, London, 1906. pp.178-189.

shop building still exists and is currently a hairdressers. In 1907 Hugh built a pretty stone-built shop with an attached cottage for the Co-operative manager in the village and moved the dairy down into the village into a purpose-built dairy. These buildings were leased to BATA.



Figure 5: Brandsby Co-operative Shop (photo by HCFC)

The steam-motor transport scheme in particular aroused much interest, and its success gave the Co-operative confidence to develop and diversify. In 1910 the dairy scheme evolved to include fattening of pigs on the skimmed milk, instead of returning this to farmers and piggeries were built in Brandsby. In the same year a sheep dip was built. A scheme was started for the grading, packing and selling of eggs. A scheme for the

grading and packing of wool and selling in bulk was also started.⁴²

Publicity through the AOS and many visitors to Brandsby, after the transport scheme went into operation. Politicians, activists, campaigners and journalists came including *The Times* writer of agricultural articles and delegations of farmers from neighbouring estates and associations, many of which were reported in on in AOS annual reports.⁴³ Interest also came from abroad. In 1915 the Union of Siberian Co-operative Associations came to see co-operative working, but the most exotic visitor also in 1915 was one Mr. Tadaatsu Ishiguro, Secretary to the Imperial Ministry of Agriculture of Japan, who was visiting Britain to explore co-operation in agriculture. He was particularly interested in the wool scheme.⁴⁴

Fairfax-Cholmeley's projects did not formulate in a vacuum; he went in search of ideas wherever they were on offer. He got his method of shed building from a Northumberland Farmer, as already noted, he collaborated with Willie Charleton and went to Ireland in search of agricultural cooperative practice. He paid many trips to Lincolnshire, to research the work with smallholdings and cooperatives of Richard Winfrey on Lord Carrington's estates. After the formation of the AOS, the round of visitors from nearby such as Ripponden Farmers Association and the agent and farmers from Lord Scarborough's South Yorkshire estate, attest to an ongoing discourse on improvements and methods. He was well aware of the work being done by the Radical Countess

⁴² BATA 100th Anniversary Booklet; AOS Annual Report 1915.

⁴³ HCFC Memoirs.

⁴⁴ AOS *Annual Reports*, 1911 & 1915.

Rosalind Howard on nearby Castle Howard estate. However, there was little scope there for exchange of ideas partly because of scale, the Howards held around 78,000 acres of estates in the north of England and could absorb quite a lot of economic recession.

Rosalind Howard, who managed the estate from 1889 was an indefatigable social reformer. She actively managed economic ventures on the estate and many philanthropic projects, for example, country holidays for children, a poor women's hospital, visits to London for farmers. She provided philanthropic employment for individuals and families in need and built stylish cottages, but her ventures were from a benevolent approach, she remained autocratic. Her projects did not need to pay their own way and in any case, she maintained a strictly hierarchical position. Fairfax-Cholmeley wanted changed practice based on community participation and economic self-sufficiency. He worked with Mark Sykes of Sledmere on the development of smallholdings, but the Sledmere estate, again a large estate of around 30,000 acres, could absorb quite a lot of rental decline and also had a secondary venture in the form of a highly successful horse racing stud.⁴⁵

The Agricultural Organisation Society

The flourishing of the Brandsby Co-operative Society took place alongside and was closely associated with the growth of the Agricultural Organisation Society (AOS). Both Willie Charleton and Hugh were involved in the setting up of this organisation, whose

⁴⁵ Henley, D., *Rosalind Howard, Countess of Carlisle*, London 1958; Ridgway, C., 'Rosalind Howard, the contradictory countess of Carlisle', in Dooley, T, et al., *Women and the Country House in Ireland and Britain*, Dublin, 2018; Sykes, C.S., *The Big House*, London, 2005.

main purpose was to encourage and support co-operation in agriculture. Hugh then spent a lot of time working nationally to promote co-operation in agriculture as well as continuing to support Brandsby. Innovations at Brandsby were used as examples of good practice by the AOS. In the first AOS annual report in 1902 Brandsby featured as the example of a growing co-operative with 81 members, sales of £4,249 and a net profit of £132. Brandsby developments with regard to manures, fertilisers, cattle cake and rail transport were widely disseminated in leaflets and speeches.

Cooperation, inspired by examples abroad, was the only serious policy being presented for the regeneration of British among writers on agriculture. Besides Pratt, mentioned above, Fairfax-Cholmeley's friend Arthur George Rogers in *The Business Side of Agriculture* in 1904, promoted it as the route to farming improvement and H.W.Wolff wrote on it in 1914. Cooperation was particularly pertinent to the success of the Liberal sponsored Small holding and Allotment development. From 1909 Government gave the AOS a grant to support and disseminate the development of cooperation in agriculture and smallholdings and allotments. In 1908 the number of co-operative societies who were members was 114; by 1920 this had risen to 381, exclusive of the numerous smallholding and allotment societies which were also members. Membership at this time in terms of the number of farmers was 80,000, equivalent to one third of the farmers in Britain.⁴⁶

Hugh served on the AOS Executive committee and later on the Journal committee. During the heyday of the AOS he was occupied in London for some days almost every

⁴⁶ Digby, Margaret, *Agricultural Co-operation in Britain*, 1949.

week, in lobbying, discussing and producing publications. Gaining support was crucial to the success of the work of the AOS, both at Westminster and around the country. At that time he was either canvassing ministers or MPs, or travelling about the country giving talks and lectures and gathering information from schemes elsewhere, often in the company of Robert Yerburgh MP, the AOS president. Yerburgh laid the foundation stone for the Brandsby trading stores and shop in 1905.⁴⁷

There are numerous newspaper reports of Yerburgh and Fairfax-Cholmeley campaigning around the country on the need for co-operatives, Yerburgh providing the political muscle and Fairfax-Cholmeley the working Brandsby model as an example. In 1905 the *Taunton Courier*, *Western Gazette*, *London Daily News*, *London Evening Standard*, *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, *Manchester Courier* and the *Whitby Gazette* all reported on Yerburgh's speeches. In 1906 and 1907 the *Stanford Mercury*, *Sussex Agricultural Express* and the *Boston Guardian* reported on Yerburgh speaking in Westminster on the Brandsby model.⁴⁸ However, in a move to reduce public spending in 1923 Government withdrew its grant. and the AOS was wound up in 1924. Cooperation as government policy was abandoned.⁴⁹ Stronger co-operatives, including BATA, survived: farmers still used their co-op, but they also shopped around.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Oxfordshire Weekly News*, 10 May 1905.

⁴⁸ *London Daily News*, 11 Jan 1907.

⁴⁹ Wolff, H. W., *Co-operation in Agriculture*, London, 1914; Pratt, 1912.

⁵⁰ Digby, p.81.

Political action

Before 1900 Fairfax-Cholmeley spent quite a bit of time politically campaigning, supporting broadly Liberal reform ideas, but mainly as a means of challenging the establishment. He freely admits that a lot of the time he spoke with the intention of “stirring things up”, rather than with a serious hope of getting a candidate elected. Even in the absence of a serious reform candidate, Fairfax-Cholmeley would support an outsider in order to unseat "the ruling clique". For example, in the County Council election of 1892 he supported a grocer from Stillington named Souter, whom he describes as being a “weak Liberal” with no real policies to put forward, specifically to unseat the sitting councillor, a Mr. Newton. Hugh’s speeches were vehemently socialist, shamelessly employing Fabian Society statistics on the evils which existed in towns, to impress on his audience the need for reform in the countryside. On this occasion he reports he rounded off his speech with:

“This was the state of the towns - what of the country? Only look round at the uncultivated fields and decaying estates! The ruling clique must be held responsible for this and to get amendment we must overthrow them and put in Souter in place of Newton.”

By this time, Hugh had a collection of supporters from Brandsby who accompanied him on these rallies.⁵¹

⁵¹HCFC Memoirs.

Though he appears to have had much fun rousing the indignation of Tory supporters of the status quo, his intentions were serious. Early on he involved himself in parish affairs, taking on the local Vestry committee. Parish Vestries preceded Parish Councils and prior to elected Councils were, together with the magistrates of the county, the rulers of rural England. They looked after the parish poor and the sick, maintained the church and churchyard and the village pound and waged battle against various vermin – sparrows, foxes, hedgehogs and so on. They also had to collect the poor rate. In Brandsby the vestry was run by four leading farmers, who took it in turns to elect each other into the various offices, without reference to anyone outside. Hugh insisted on their calling a proper open meeting, and with his supporters did succeed in getting the election of a new member - not that it made any difference to the effectiveness of how things were run, - he said, but that was not the point.⁵²

In January 1894 there was much Liberal indignation about the House of Lords' amendments to their Parish Councils Bill, which considerably weakened it. At a meeting in the Festival Concert Room, Westminster, a resolution was proposed calling for removal of the right of the House of Lords to veto legislation. Hugh vigorously supported the resolution, according to the *The Yorkshire Gazette* he said that he was bitterly disappointed on the compromise on the Parish Councils Bill. In strong language he berated the “*tyranny of the squire and the parson*”. Free speech was not possible in the country, he said.

“The parson and his wife would come in, often during dinner hour, without knocking and

⁵² HCFC Memoirs; Poole, K.P., & Keith-Lucas, B., *Parish Government 1894-1994*, National Association of Local Councils, 1994, pp.1-5.

the farmer would stand and normally keep his hat on the while. Such insolence in the country was something which townsfolk did not understand. They did not realise what a Parish Council bill meant to people in the country, or what tyranny they had to put up with from squire and parson or the corruption and mal-administration of parish affairs.” There would be no more reform until the House of Lords was got rid off, he finished, to wild applause.⁵³

However, after the formation of the Brandsby Cooperative and his marriage in 1903 Fairfax-Cholmeley, put his political effort into promoting the work of the AOS and in helping to strengthen Liberal rural policies. Though he broadly supported Liberal party policies, he promoted inter-party working both within the AOC and in YASHA, the Yorkshire Association Smallholdings Association and always prioritised practical action.

⁵³ *Yorkshire Gazette*, 13 Jan 1894.

1914 and after

In 1914, a long cherished scheme of Hugh's was completed, namely the building of a "Town Hall", as he called it. Hugh provided the land, which he leased to the Town Hall committee at a nominal sum, the design for the Hall and the building stone. The rest of the money was raised by the committee, including Hugh's wife Alice who organised a bazaar.



Figure 6: Cholmeley Hall, Brandsby 2018 (Author photo),

The opening of the Town Hall marked the end of Hugh's reform programme for Brandsby. His final scheme, a Light Railway from Haxby to Brandsby, for which plans and work continued until 1919, was stalled by WW1, then finally overtaken by the changing economics of road versus rail transport.

The fortunes of Brandsby as a community may have been secured, but the financial viability of the estate, like many other estates, was floundering. Despite having paid off £33,000 worth of mortgages in 1895 or 1896, with the aid of the sale of Gilling and some land, a list of liabilities, from sometime soon after 1905, shows loans and mortgages to the sum of £23,400, plus annual payments to family members amounting to £847 17s 8d. In 1906, income over expenditure of the Brandsby Estate was £1078 0s 1d. In 1920 a balance sheet shows the surplus as only £106 9s 3d. In 1937 a handwritten note of the state of Hugh's bank balance shows a loss of £99.

Hugh's position was no different to that of other landowners around the country. Falling agricultural prices, falling rents and increasing costs provoked sales of land, which became a flood following Lloyd George's Land Tax Bill of 1909/10. The *Estates Gazette* annual review of land and property sales commented:

*"Not for many generations has there been so enormous a dispersal piecemeal of landed estates as in 1911, 12 and 13... and the supply of ancestral acres in the provinces is apparently unlimited."*⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Murray, B. K., *The People's Budget 1909/10*, Oxford, 1980, p.299.

In 1912 Hugh sold the family seat Brandsby Hall with about 1000 acres of land and, shortly afterwards, his dearly loved Mill Hill. However, he continued to manage the remainder of his estate for the rest of his life, improving buildings, drainage and water supplies on an ongoing basis. From then on the maintenance and improvement of his farming land took most of his attention, together with trying to generate sufficient income to support himself and his family.

Hugh died on 14th April 1940, aged 76 years. His death notice in the *Yorkshire Post* recorded that he was a social reformer, built the Brandsby Village Hall, established the BATA and was a member of the Central Landowners Association. He resided at Swathgill in the house he and Alice had had built for themselves in the 1920s. He was also a Justice of the Peace and Deputy Lieutenant for the North Riding. Management of the estate was increasingly a financial liability rather than an asset and the bulk of it was sold in 1940. Hugh had husbanded his estate to the end; entries in the estate cash book are in his hand up to February 1940.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Upon the opening of the Town Hall in 1914, the people of Brandsby got together and commissioned a portrait of Hugh Fairfax-Cholmeley. A book of subscribers which accompanied the portrait said it was an expression of thanks “for all his many kindnesses”. Who directed the format of the portrait, and who the artist is, is unknown, but its design is well chosen. Hugh sits in a chair in what appears to be his study, in an

⁵⁵ *Yorkshire Post*, 14 April 1940.

informal pose, dressed in country clothes. His guitar, with which he had played and sung at many a social event, is just visible on the left-hand side. The desk on the right and the books behind him indicate both his interests and his official status, but overall he is portrayed as an earnest man of modest demeanour.



Figure 7: Presentation portrait of Hugh Fairfax-Cholmeley (Photo commissioned by HCFC 1914).

Hugh's acceptance speech expresses most clearly his love for Brandsby, its people and its land, and his conviction that it should be a real home for **all** those who lived there, of whom he was just one. He had aimed to create a community in which those who worked the land would choose to stay and not look to emigrate to towns. His work in Brandsby had been an explicit programme in reimagining class relations, in the same way as his work in East London had been in the city.⁵⁶

Before 1914 the 'land question' occupied a central place in politics - to reduce the disproportionate political power and influence of aristocratic landowners, but it came to an abrupt end with the onset of the first World War, when it was abandoned.⁵⁷ After 1918, the continued decline of the agricultural economy meant the landed aristocrat could no longer be seen as the main enemy of democracy and progress, a new class of property speculators, share banks, and agents held the reins. Prior to 1914 land reform had produced a number of measures beneficial to rural society, but there was no revolutionary social or economic change.⁵⁸ The Royal Commission inquiry of 1919, into which Fairfax-Cholmeley had put a lot of work,⁵⁹ did not result in any Government decisions about land management and, it was not until World War II that state intervention in farming really took hold. By then changes in land ownership had happened by default, in many cases land being sold to the existing tenants, creating the basis on which agriculture moved to agribusiness, as it is today.⁶⁰ However, at Brandsby, the current farms now flourish, the

⁵⁶ HCFC Papers, Speech pamphlet.

⁵⁷ Tichelar, op.cit.

⁵⁸ Readman, op.cit.

⁵⁹ He summarised responses and wrote a briefing paper for the Commission, copies in his private papers.

⁶⁰ Newby, p.180.

Town Hall and a community tradition remains, along with good quality housing stock, now highly sought after. BATA, though no longer in the village, flourishes with 13 branches and is one of the biggest suppliers of agricultural goods in the North Riding, but the Brandsby and Stearsby estate is consigned to history.

Sources

Where not otherwise indicated, information is taken from the biographical papers of Hugh Fairfax-Cholmeley. These are loose pages of several attempts at writing an account of his life and work. Further information and some transcriptions from the above are available at fairfaxcholmeley.com . A copy of the original essay from which this is adapted is also available at <https://fairfaxcholmeley.com/blog-magazine/>

Most papers and documents relating to the Cholmeley family were deposited in the North Yorkshire Records Office at Northallerton in 1940 by Francis Fairfax-Cholmeley, eldest son of Hugh. He retained papers pertaining to his father, telling the librarian he intended to go through them first. He did not go through them until later life when he was ill, at which point he destroyed some. Hugh Fairfax-Cholmeley's papers became distributed around the families of his remaining children. His handwritten memoirs came into my possession through my mother Rosamond Fairfax-Cholmeley. Various other

diaries and many estate documents remain with other members of the family. Most of the papers consulted in this research, namely those held by myself, have now been deposited in the North Riding Records Office at Northallerton

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