

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Whiteway Colony

Tom Keell Wolfe

February 1992

Tom Keell Wolfe
Whiteway Colony
February 1992

Retrieved 26 June 2022 from
<https://libcom.org/article/raven-17-use-land>

This article was originally written for *The Raven Anarchist*
Quarterly #17: Use of Land, pp. 34-39.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

It is now approaching 100 years since a small group of people (who had lived in a community which seemed to be going in a direction they did not like) set off to find land upon which to build a new way of living.

After quite a long time a piece of land was found and bought with the help of sympathisers. They had a stone cottage (Whiteway House) and 42 acres of land. There is a stream on one boundary, and the whole is cut in two by a road, giving the Wet Ground and the Dry Ground. The latter was settled later. All this land lies between 750ft and 850ft above sea level, which meant a much shorter growing season than the land in the valleys around.

At first life revolved around the cottage, with some colonists having to find accommodation within a few miles around. It was intended that life would be on a communal basis, and an attempt was made to avoid the use of money.

When the land was bought it had to be transferred to someone and so three of the founders (Joseph Bum, William Sinclair and Sudbury Protheroe) accepted it on behalf of the community. In 1899 the title deeds were burnt with some ceremony and the Colony's basis was laid down - there should be no private ownership of land

- control of the land and any business to do with it should be in the hands of the Colony Meeting - individual plots of land were held on the basis of use-occupation. Plots were allocated by the Meeting, which had no power to take it away. Where the occupier left Whiteway the land reverted to the control of the Meeting, and could be reallocated.

The taking of separate plots came about after a time because there were some who, in the words of Nellie Shaw (one of the founders), were prepared to use the communal knife and fork but not the communal spade and fork.

There were never any sets of rules or beliefs to which members must adhere - although there was a Tolstoyan influence among those who were the founders. In fact a Czech - Francis Sedlak - who had gone to Russia to see Tolstoy and to learn his way of life was told by the great man that the only place he knew where an attempt was being made to live that way was at Whiteway, whereupon Francis made his way to the Colony where he arrived in 1900. He settled there with Nellie Shaw.

Some local people took advantage of the non-resistance of the community - crops were taken, cattle driven in and so forth, and it was many years before there was any local acceptance of the community's existence.

Gradually members started small commercial enterprises - William Sinclair was a fanner (1905) with dairy cows and supplied members and others with milk and Rachelle Sinclair made good cheeses.

Sudbury Protheroe had been making bread, and in 1906 Protheroe's Bakery was founded and became an important part of life there, bread and cakes being made there until very recently.

By 1909 minutes were being kept of the proceedings at the Colony Meeting - where all decisions continued to be made on a general consensus of views. It was many years before voting became the rule. The Colony Meeting was made up of all those in use-occupation of land. At first the few settlers took over fairly

large plots of land, hoping to make a living for their families. When, years later, these larger areas reverted to the Colony from people leaving in one way or another, it became possible to split up some of these holdings, so that new members could join the community.

The principle of no private ownership of the land was maintained throughout, and new members had to sign a declaration to that effect.

This record of the acceptance of the principle was to play a very important part many years later, when someone wanted to buy a house and wanted a mortgage (not possible without a title to the land) A local solicitor assured the proposed vendor that he could register the land in her name. However, a friendly lawyer in London had, not long before, advised us to put a 'caution' on the land with the Central Land Registry, and when the request was made for registration of title they referred the matter to us and we were able to state our objections.

Thus it came about in 1955 that the matter came before the Chief Land Registrar in London, and among other matters we were able to produce the actual letter in which the original holder of the land accepted the principle, and the Registrar found for the Colony.

By this time the three trustees were dead, and although they had renounced all interest in the land in law they were the actual owners. There was still alive the widow of Sudbury Protheroe living in Salisbury, and the Registrar said that even though she could be considered the owner, if she wished to return she would need to apply to the Colony Meeting for the use of some land, as the Meeting had established full control.

When, in 1929, the Meetings had become larger in an attempt to get business done more easily a 'Director of Discussions' was decided upon and after a few years a system of voting came in. All those living at Whiteway could attend meetings, but only land holders could vote in matters affecting the land.

All this time life was fairly primitive at Whiteway. No running water and no electricity was available, so cooking and lighting was by solid fuel or paraffin.

A communal hall had been built by the colonists, and this was also heated and lit in the same way, though for a time an acetylene gas lighting system was operated.

The hall was in very full use, for all manner of activities - plays and play-readings, country dancing, 'modem' dancing, musical evenings and lectures by colonists or visitors. As it was no less uncomfortable than many of our houses attendances were good!

It was not until 1948 that water mains reached the Colony (21 years after it was first promised). Digging the trenches in our solid Cotswold rock proved too much for the machines, and it was done in the end mainly by navvies.

Electricity reached us in 1954 - some were connected by Christmas, and in one case I know of the daughter of the house, through her school experience, was able to show her mother how to use the cooker!

The rocky nature of much of the land made it very hard to get a living from our gardens, but against this we had the advantage of a lack of sewage systems, so that, with proper composting, everything that was taken from the land went back into it, and the rather shallow soil was at least very fertile. Shortage of water could be a very big problem.

Until the arrival of water mains most people collected drinking water from a pipe fed by a very good spring, but for those on the 'Dry Ground' it could mean a daily walk of up to 30 minutes. For some reason this was known as the 'simple life'.

One big problem that arose from the way Whiteway had developed was that while the land was held in common, houses were privately owned. As was mentioned earlier, no mortgage could be raised on a house where there was no tide to the land, and in later years when more people from outside came to live, only those with

possibility of roaming freely on the Cotswold landscape was a great joy to us.

For many years a small school was run at the Colony, mainly by one Mary Robert, who was a teacher, and whose school attracted much interest even in orthodox local circles, though it was operated on what would now be called very modem lines. At first this was held in private houses, but later when the hall was built an extension became the school. It was supported by voluntary contributions.

Mary and Basil Robert were very active in craft activities - Basil became Rural Industries Organiser for Gloucestershire and had a very big hand in reviving such activities as thatching, blacksmithing and so forth. Weaving, furniture making and sandal making were actively pursued for many years.

After the war in 1947 a Whiteway girl - Doolie, who had been a Land Girl, made use of her nursery training to run a small nursery school in the school building.

enough resources to buy outright were able to come in. This meant in many cases older retired people, or well-placed younger ones.

As the available empty plots became more and more scarce, sometimes there might be two or more families wanting to buy available houses, which meant that the Colony had to decide to which one to allocate the land.

There were certainly some cases where those accepted failed to live up to their promise, and contributed very little to the life of the group, while a man with little sympathy with the early ideals could turn out to be a much 'better colonist', devoting a lot of time and energy to the interests of Whiteway.

As houses came to be more comfortable and better built there has always been the possibility of some land-value being added to the asking price for a house. There has always been an acceptance of one quarter of an acre as the minimum holding, so that in many cases there is no possibility of splitting the plot even though it has been returned to the Meeting for reallocation.

The earliest houses were almost always built by the incoming settler, and were in many cases built very cheaply. As money became available they were improved or enlarged, but in most cases they were of timber.

After the First World War various surplus wooden buildings were brought to Whiteway and reassembled either as they had been or were remodelled. Many of these are still in use, and with good maintenance have a long life. One family built a small house of the local stone normally used for walls round fields, and replaced it later with a brick house. Our relations with the Planning Authorities in Stroud were good - they recognised that our standards were not the same as those in town or even in the villages, and they usually accepted the suggestions of our own planning committee.

This went on happily for years, but of recent years - since the middle 1960s - stricter building regulations generally made the erection of cheap houses much more difficult.

By this time the conduct of the meetings had also become more formal, partly due to the increasing population (which had the effect also of 'diluting' the original group of idealists). After a long and at times tempestuous series of discussions the idea was accepted to have Standing Orders to regulate the conduct of the Colony Meetings. This was something of an echo of the tussle between the original more or less anarchistic approach and a tendency in some quarters to a more Marxist ideology. Though the whole thing went through on a basically friendly basis, there were underlying tensions which caused a few personal problems.

When the water supply came to us, there was also the question of how to pay for it. The company installing it agreed to pay for the trenches along the main roads, but the ones to the various houses varied in length so much that it was agreed by a large majority that we would all pay the same. There were, however, instances of people who, on grounds of 'conscience' would only pay for the short stretch between their home and the main.

The roads themselves were always made and maintained on a communal basis, and those who took part in all weathers worked very hard with fairly primitive tools but much enthusiasm, even the children joining in with stone hammers.

Whiteway attracted people from all walks of life, and from many parts of the world, though the original group were all from the British Isles.

Some who supported its inception were known in other circles, such as Aylmer Maude, the translator of Tolstoy, Fred, the father of Malcolm, Muggerridge (who was a fairly frequent visitor at one time) and many others: Gaspard Marin (Gassy) who came from Belgium with his companion Jeanne and her son Gustave; Marcel Morand from France, and 'Ray' Kleber Claux also from France. Theodore Michaltchev came from Bulgaria - like so many others as a refugee from military service. Hugo van Wadenoyen from Holland came to Whiteway by way of South Wales (some research on Hugo by Colin Osman has been of great help with this article. I got

in contact with Colin as a result of a letter from him in Freedom asking for help over Hugo and George Davison). Francis Sedlack from Czechoslovakia has already been mentioned. He is known as a follower of Hegel; his companion, Nellie Shaw, wrote a book about him, and she was the author of a book *Whiteway, a Colony on the Cotswolds* which gives a much fuller account of the origins and early years of Whiteway. Rachele Sinclair came from Russia, via the USA.

Some of these names will already be familiar to readers of *Freedom* and *The Raven*, as will also the names of my parents who took a very full part in the Colony from the early 1920s. Tom Keel!, editor of *Freedom* for many years, and Lilian Wolfe who was an enormous support to him and to the anarchist movement for half a century. One could mention many other people, and there would still be names omitted which should perhaps be included, but I must mention Fred Charles (Slaughter), well known to older generations in connection with the infamous Walsall trial. He bought one of the surplus army huts and remodelled it for his home, and little did I imagine as I played in the rafters as he worked - I was quite small - that in later years Jose and I would raise our family there.

The word 'Colony' led to all manner of stories and beliefs about Whiteway. It was obviously not a Crown Colony, so it was assumed to be a nudist one and coaches used to stop there with the driver urging people to keep their eyes open. I was even told once that the postman had to undress to deliver the letters.

The other thing that led to a lot of newspaper imaginings from time to time was that quite a number of couples anticipated the present trend toward living together unmarried. Every few years the less responsible papers would remember us and make life difficult for a time.

Those who lived there as children have an extremely happy memory of the freedom of life at Whiteway. Most adults were Auntie or Uncle and most houses were open to all, and of course the