

SEARCHLIGHT ON LAND, LABOUR, AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS 1903

“BURGHLEY HOUSE BY STAMFORD TOWN.”

By John Taylor. Author of “Social Sermonettes for Working Men.”

“The Marquis of Exeter, of Burghley House, Stamford, owns 13,545 acres of land in Northamptonshire, with a rent roll of £21,015 a year. He is also the owner of 10,712 acres in Rutlandshire, with a rental of “16,389 yearly. And in Lincolnshire he has 3,327 acres, with a rent roll of £10,808 yearly.” New Domesday Book 1903.

When I come across a proud aristocrat who owns 27,684 acres of land that God gave us all, and who has an income of £48,212 a year from that land, I naturally want to know how he came into the possession of all that land, why he should be allowed to keep it, and what return he is giving to the community for all the money he is taking out of his fellow men’s pockets.

It was in this spirit of inquiry that I took train from Peterborough one morning, and went to see for myself what the ancient Royal Borough of Stamford is like, and to unearth some interesting facts from its history.

After the dissolution of the monasteries and the confiscation of the abbey lands the manor of Stamford fell into the hands of the ancestors of the present Marquis of Exeter. His family traces its descent from William Cecil of Bourne, in Lincolnshire, who became Secretary of State to Queen Elizabeth, and was elevated to the peerage under the title of Baron Burghley. Enormous grants of Crown lands, and many Enclosure Acts, and a few prudent marriages with rich heiresses will easily account for the vast accumulation of land in this fortunate family.



“Burghley House by Stamford town” is one of the ancestral homes of England, and, like Chatsworth House and Eaton Hall, is a show place, where you can be admitted to feast your eyes on payment of a shilling. It is a magnificent place, stored with tapestries, and needlework, and pictures and bric-a-brac, and works of art, and antique furniture enough to

last a score of connoisseurs a life time. The house is only a short pleasant walk from the town, and it stands in its own park of fourteen hundred acres. Burghley Park is stocked with deer, and plentifully studded with chestnuts, oaks, and lime trees. On a fine sunny day, it must be a delightful attractive spot, but the day I was there the river was in flood, and the rain was coming down in torrents, and every tree under which you tried to shelter gave you a heavy shower bath.

If you want to know what militant landlordism can do to ruin a town you should walk through the streets of Stamford, and use your eyes and ears. It is a quaint old-fashioned place, full of churches, and beer houses, and alms-houses, and in the good old times it must have been a perfect nest of political venality and corruption.

The unreformed Parliament sent two members to the House of Commons, and the "Spectator" of those days tells us how prize-fighters and bullies were hired in London at five shillings a day, all found, and were turned loose on the electors of Stamford to dragoon them to the polling booths. The free and independent voters tore their clothes from their backs, and broke their heads, and obliged them to seek shelter in a malthouse to save their lives.

When the election was over the Marquis of Exeter of those days served notice to quit on all his tenants who had not voted for his nominees, and he warned all the widows and spinsters who held land or houses under him that they would be evicted, too, if they did not get married before the next election, and find husbands who would vote as they were told.

But the crowning disaster came to this little town when the Marquis of Exeter opposed the Great Northern Railway scheme for carrying the line through Stamford. It was proposed to construct a line of railway and build a station within a few hundred yards of his park gates, but he raised a terrible row about this proposal. He resisted the scheme both in the House of Commons and outside, and flung away his money so recklessly that the company withdrew their scheme, and built their line about four miles away. His chief objection to a railway was that it would injure his property in the town and put an end to the coaching and posting business at the George Hotel.

When the railway had passed him by and left him severely alone, he was glad to build a line of railway nearly four miles in length to link his forsaken town with the railway at Essendine.

Stamford has never recovered from this terrible disaster, and it never will. The engine, carriage works and repairing shops that would have enriched it were taken to Peterborough instead and they will never come back.

The principal industries of the town are a small foundry and agricultural implement shop, some breweries and saw mills, and one or two large timber yards. The population is only eight thousand, and it is stationary or declining.

It has a sewerage scheme on hand that will cost £50,000, and that is a big undertaking for so small a town. It works out to more than six pounds per head for every man, woman, and child in the place. About two hundred new houses have been built in Stamford during the last few years, and yet the population is less now than it was before they were built. Those new houses were built to replace some vile rookeries and filthy slums that have been pulled down.

But nothing can galvanise the sleepy, mildewed, medieval town into life and vigour and progress. It has had some fine opportunities and some splendid chances, but it was never ready when its opportunity came.

Source

Cotton Factory Times November 6th 1903 p7/c1-2

Notes.

The Cotton Factory Times (1885-1937) was a Socialist newspaper aimed at cotton workers in Lancashire and Cheshire.

Using an online CPI calculator; £48,212 in 1903 is worth £7,491,401 in 2025. In pure cash terms 48,212 gold sovereigns at present prices (May 2025) would be worth close to £28.4 million. The calculated income in this article does not include any profits from the Burghley Estate property portfolio.