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'AS TO THE LAND, BUY BY ALL MEANS' – THE HAMPSHIRE ESTATE OF WILLIAM COBBETT (1763–1835)

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ABSTRACT

William Cobbett, the political writer and reformer, made extensive property purchases in Hampshire during the early 1800s but his investment in land resulted in financial ruin, rather than the political independence and financial security that he had sought. Within about 15 years, his farms had been repossessed by the mortgagee and he had been made bankrupt. This article will consider his landownership in southern Hampshire in detail. It will not only identify his principal land holdings, and the uses to which he put the land, but also consider the factors that drove him to buy land, the complex manner in which he financed his purchases, and the wider significance of his land ownership, in terms of his career as a political writer and reformer.

INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 1804, William Cobbett took what was a bold step, given the communicational limitations of the time. He decided to make his principal home at Botley and to run his weekly newspaper from there, some seventy miles from London where it was published. This arrangement was only made practicable by improvements that had been made in the efficiency of the postal system by the early nineteenth century and because Cobbett could entrust the day-to-day management of his publication to John Wright (1770/1–1844), his assistant and business partner.

Throughout his life, Cobbett professed a preference for the life of the country to that of the city, and he wanted his children to have the sort of rural upbringing that he had enjoyed. He himself no doubt wanted to escape the restrictions of the house he was then renting in Duke Street in Westminster, which had no garden to speak of and backed on to a mason's yard (Laxton 1985, 22 Da). However, these factors cannot fully account for the decision to move to Hampshire, and certainly not the speed and scale of his land-buying there. There were deeper motivations at play, and to understand these it is necessary to look more closely at his circumstances during this period. On his return from America in 1800, Cobbett had acquired a patron in the Whig politician William Windham (1750–1810). Windham had been impressed by Cobbett's strong patriotic and anti-Jacobin writings while in America, and the two men became friends. Windham had helped fund the successful establishment of Cobbett's *Political Register*. However, by 1804 Cobbett was apparently wanting to break free of Windham's influence, and their friendship was to end two years later. Of more immediate concern to Cobbett may have been the implications of certain events that had taken place earlier in the year as a result of the so-called 'Juverna' letters. Cobbett's publication of these letters, which were strongly critical of the British administration in Dublin, in the *Political Register* resulted in his being tried for seditious libel in May 1804. He was convicted and, two days later, lost a related civil action arising from the same libels, damages of £500 being awarded against him (Spater 1982, 1, 128–131).

Although he was never sentenced for the criminal action, the costs and the damages arising from the civil case were undoubtedly a severe blow to Cobbett. He had now been made forcefully aware that he was no safer from potentially ruinous libel actions on this side of the Atlantic than he had been in America,

where they had dogged the latter part of his journalistic career. The treatment meted out to him during the criminal trial may also have stung him. The Attorney-General (and later Prime Minister), Spencer Perceval in his address to the jury had asked, 'Gentleman, who is Mr. Cobbett? Is he a man of family in this country? Is he a man writing purely from motives of patriotism? *Quis homo hic est? Quo patre natus?* (Who is this man? Who was his father?)' (Howell 1821, col. 36; Ingrams 2005, 61–62).

Did the impact of the 'Juverna' cases and Perceval's words cause Cobbett to decide to buy land? In the absence of any clear statement as to how Cobbett viewed these matters, we cannot know for sure. However, what is clear is that even though he had still been struggling in July 1804 to pay £471, the balance of the 'Juverna' damages (Melville 1913, 1, 211), by early autumn he appears to have been fixed on his intention to move to Hampshire and to join the elite, property-owning, class from which Perceval had so pointedly sought to exclude him.

THE DESIRE TO ACQUIRE LAND

For the next five years, until another successful government prosecution for seditious libel destroyed his ability to obtain credit, and curtailed his land-purchasing, Cobbett demonstrated an enormous hunger for land, and took active steps to purchase, often in a piecemeal fashion, what was to become a sizeable estate. He not only enjoyed owning land but understood how it conferred political power and social status. In practical terms, it qualified the owner to vote and run for Parliament and to hold certain public offices, and to hunt game. It also helped to confer something more nebulous but still essential to anyone aspiring to the status of a gentleman in Georgian England: independence. To be less than independent, by being, for example, obligated to another (as perhaps Cobbett feared he was to Windham), was potentially to have doubt cast on one's masculinity and legitimacy to participate in politics. As McCormack (2011, 4) has stated, this ideal of independence meant that 'only virtuous and free individuals should be entrusted with political responsibility'. Cobbett claimed in October 1805 that 'From my very outset in politics, I formed the resolution of keeping myself perfectly independent…' (cited in McCormack 2011, 33), and it is perhaps not coincidental that those words were written after Cobbett had begun to make his Hampshire land acquisitions. Land ownership may also have had the practical benefit of providing a platform for Cobbett, allowing him to extend his influence from journalism to active political engagement. He was to use the County meeting at Winchester in November 1808 to attack Sir Arthur Wellesley, as he then was, in respect of his actions in relation to the Convention of Cintra, and in 1809 organised the requisition of a County meeting to congratulate Colonel Gwyllym Wardle for his actions in relation to the scandal involving the Duke of York and Mary Anne Clarke (*Hampshire Chronicle*, 7 November 1808; 24 April 1809). Significantly, Cobbett informed Wright that the sixty-nine signatories to the 1809 requisition were 'worth more in land than all the King's cabinet ministers put together' (BL Add MS 22907, f. 146). The inference was clear: landownership bestowed independence upon the Hampshire petitioners, and meant they could be trusted.

Cobbett also understood that, for such independence to be conferred, it was not enough to simply own land; it had to be the right kind of land. When, in 1807, he was offered a coppice by his friend Richard Smith, a Botley shopkeeper, he observed to Wright:

> But, I find it to be what is called Bond Land, that is to say, not freehold, which whatever you purchase must be. Bond land is attended with a great deal of trouble, and requires, annually personal attention and attendance, besides that it gives a man no weight in the county (Illinois, Post-1650 MS 348, 29 November 1807).

Cobbett did not always follow his own advice. He did, it seems, subsequently acquire Smith's coppice, and, as will become apparent, much of his land was to be copyhold. Perhaps by then having acquired Fairthorn Farm, a 250-acre freehold, he was able to take a more relaxed

Fig. 1 Accommodation bill drawn by Cobbett in 1807. (Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, ref. 4628)

attitude to his status. It is also clear that he recognised that land, whether freehold or copyhold, was a good investment in times of high inflation. In 1809, he informed a correspondent, 'As to the land, buy by all means. Freehold is worth 35 years purchase (if great part is left at 5. per. cent) because money every day depreciates, and while the nominal rent of the land must increase, that of the mortgage cannot' (UOL, GB 0096, AL30, 9 May 1809).

FUNDING THE LAND PURCHASES

To understand why the purchases of Cobbett's Hampshire properties were often protracted and tortuous, it is necessary to appreciate the manner in which he funded them. As we have seen, in the summer of 1804 he was still struggling to pay the damages and costs of the 'Juverna' cases. He had returned from America in 1800 with little capital and whilst the *Political Register* was profitable, and its circulation increasing, other publishing ventures such as *State Trials* and the *Parliamentary History* were not. He had, therefore, to resort to borrowing and the manner in which he did so might have surprised his more cautious friends and associates. Cobbett ultimately fell out with Wright in 1810 and when renewed animosity between them resulted in a libel action in 1820, Cobbett's sometimes rash financial transactions were laid bare for all to see. Wright's counsel referred to Cobbett's land purchases and explained the manner in which he raised funds:

> In 1804, Mr. Cobbett took his first journey to Southampton, and being strongly attracted by the rural scenery in that part of the country, he became the purchaser of a small estate in the neighbourhood, and having formed a bad opinion of the stability of the Public Funds, he became a large speculator in land […] and in order to raise the money necessary to make good his several purchases in the country, he had recourse to Accommodation Paper, and used the names of his two publishers, Mr. Bagshaw and Mr. Budd; which I must say, Gentlemen, for a man who was all the while writing, against the Paper System, was somewhat inconsistent (Wright 1820, 6).

The term 'Accommodation Paper' (Fig. 1) referred to the dubious practice of using contrived bills of exchange, not connected with any actual business activity, to raise unsecured loans (Rogers 2004, 225; Chun 2019, 12–13). Given his lack of capital, Cobbett was forced to raise funds for his land purchases in this

Fig. 2 View of Mr Cobbett's House, Botley, Hants, 1817. Courtesy of Hampshire Record Office. Top 37/2/2

way, as well as by direct, unsecured borrowing from friends and acquaintances, because, at least to begin with, he seems to have had an aversion to obtaining money on mortgage. This may have been due to pride or a reluctance to reveal his true financial position, but, whatever the reason, the manner of funding he used meant that the completion of purchases was often delayed while he struggled to raise the necessary funds.

BOTLEY HOUSE (1805)

Cobbett had spent the autumn of 1804 at Botley and several *Political Register* articles were written from there. He returned to London in October but was back in Hampshire early the following year, and probably purchased Botley House when it was auctioned on 17th January (*Hampshire Chronicle*, 7/14 January 1805). The purchase was completed by the end of March, the price for the house and its four acres or so of land being £1,000 (Nuffield, XVIII/1). Botley House was an imposing building, built in about 1785 (*Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 24 August 1812). Cobbett later described it as 'about fifty feet long, forty wide, three clear stories high, with a high roof and high chimneys' (Cobbett 1828, para. 350). A surviving engraving shows a compact neo-classical house of 5 bays (HRO, Top 37/2/2) (Fig. 2). However, this engraving needs to be treated with some caution as it does not show some of the alterations that Cobbett is known to have made to the house. Cobbett appears to have started renovating the house and laying out the garden in the late summer and autumn of 1805. He informed Wright in August: 'My labours here will be nearly over before you come. They have been terrible.' By the end of September, he was telling Wright that he has 'got rid of my workmen' and is able

'to sit down in quiet and neatness' (BL Add. MS 22906, ff. 74/89). The house had been used as a chapel of ease during the previous ownership – the Botley parish church being then some distance from the village – and the workmen had presumably been employed in reconfiguring the interior. When Cobbett acquired the house, there had been a dining room and drawing room on the ground floor and bedrooms above. By the end of his period of ownership, the drawing room '24 feet by 16' was on the first floor above and a library had taken the place of some of the bedrooms (*Hampshire Chronicle*, 7 January 1805; *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 15 August 1822). Later, in June 1808, Cobbett added a 'very handsome' portico 'with four large stone steps and pillars' to the side of the house facing the Hamble (Nuffield, XXX/14/1–2; BL Add. MS 31126, ff. 40–1). It is the absence of this feature from the house shown in the 1817 engraving that suggests that, despite it purporting to show Cobbett's house at that time, it was perhaps based on a painting of the house made before Cobbett acquired it. A plan of the house and grounds made at about the time it was sold by Cobbett's mortgagee seems to show the footprint of the portico (HRO, Copy/59/1). It is presumably this engraving that Cobbett's daughter Eleanor was referring to in a letter she wrote in 1897:

> Since Susan and I left London, there was sent to us a picture, a print of the house we lived in at Botley, in Hampshire. […] My father bought it in 1804 and went to live there in 1805; & there I was born. After going to live there, my father made great alterations in the place and the house. So that this picture does not represent it as I ever remember it, and the representation is unsatisfactory. In 1819, when my father went to America, fearing the government at that time, this picture of the house was issued, at some shops at Southampton, or somewhere in the neighbourhood (Southampton Museum Service, 86.1984.27).

Cobbett also spent lavishly in laying out the grounds. He grubbed out 'some *Lombardy Poplars*, and some few other things of the tree and shrub kind. […] So that there stood this great high house, upon a piece of *bare ground*' (Cobbett 1828, para. 350). By the time the house was sold by Cobbett's mortgagee in the 1830s, the alterations he had made were plain to see. There was an area of formal garden in the area next to the stable yard – the latter survives – and Church Lane. Beyond this, towards the Hamble, there was an extensive horseshoe-shaped shrubbery which sheltered 'three quarters of an acre of grass ground' where Cobbett grazed the two Alderney cows that met the milk requirements of his household (HRO, Copy/59/1; Cobbett 1819, para. 132). A visitor in 1807 had observed 'that the only way to get to Mr. Cobbett's house was through his stables and a very dirty yard'. This was, it seems, soon remedied by his construction of a 'perfect and handsome stable yard' (Hansard 1812, col. 40; Nuffield, XVII).

COCK STREET FARM (1805)

Cobbett's first land purchase was a small farm in the parish of Droxford. He agreed to pay £1,700 for '37 Acres of good chiefly Arable land' (*Hampshire Chronicle*, 24 June 1805; Illinois, Post-1650 MS 348, 1820 Statement). Even this relatively modest purchase strained Cobbett's finances. Despite the best endeavours of James Swann, Cobbett's paper supplier and unofficial bill broker, it proved difficult to raise the purchase monies using accommodation bills. On the 20 September 1805, a seemingly jittery Cobbett wrote to Wright:

> The notes must be with Mr. Swann on the 25th instant, so that, you literally have not one moment to lose. They must be sent to me on Monday, and on Tuesday I shall send them off to him after having endorsed them. – Observe well, that if this is not done, my purchase at Droxford fails, and I am, in some part, disgraced. (BL Add MS 22906, f. 80)

In the event, the vendor, Reverend J. Thorold, agreed to accept a down payment of £300 in cash and gave Cobbett immediate possession. Cock Street was copyhold, and was some distance from Botley. Cobbett's brother, Thomas, occupied the farmhouse and it would seem that land was intended to provide him with a

livelihood. Moreover, such a purchase would in no way have fulfilled Cobbett's land-owning ambitions.

FAIRTHORN FARM (1806)

Cobbett had not fully paid for Cock Street when, in May of the following year, he purchased at a public auction at Titchfield the 250-acre Fairthorn Farm from the trustees of the late William Hornby of Hook Park, with John Clewer, a Botley neighbour, acting as Cobbett's nominee (*Hampshire Chronicle*, 24 March 1806; HRO 34M99/1). The tenure was freehold and it was just the sort of property Cobbett wanted, and it was to form the heart of his agricultural and sporting estate. The price was £5,250 and in addition the standing timber was to be purchased for £4,125. Cobbett subsequently agreed to purchase the timber yard adjacent to Curbridge Creek for £300, so the total price was £9,675 (HRO 34M99/1). It was a substantial sum, and again Cobbett struggled to raise it. Even prior to the auction, he was scrabbling to get together the deposit. As he reported to Wright:

> I have provided 500l for a few days, but, the rest must be got me some how or other by you. – On the tenth, by post, I send off the money to Mr. Clewer. – Less will not do; and later will not do. – I have told him to expect it; and, without it, I cannot expect him to be prepared to act. He has been at great pains about it. – Every sort of expense must now be spared, until the object is accomplished; and until the farm be paid for. (BL Add MS 22906, f. 139)

If raising the deposit was difficult, the completion monies provided an even greater challenge. It seems that he may even have used real or alleged defects in the Hornby title to the land as a means to delay completion. By May 1807, the patience of the advisors to the Hornby trustees was exhausted. Writing to the Duke of Portland's advisors, who were assisting in answering Cobbett's lawyer's title queries, they observed:

> It is plain, that Mr Shadwell has been instructed to throw every possible obstruction in the way of Mr Hornby's insisting on conclusion of the purchase. But, by your obliging assistance, we hope to drive Mr Cobbett from this subterfuge very shortly. (HRO 5M53/1090/9/4)

Ultimately, the sellers were to prevail, and Cobbett seems to have raised the balance required to complete by a combination of accommodation bills ('from 2 months to 2 months') and a loan of £5,000 from the Reverend William Phillips of Eling, completion finally taking place in June 1807, over a year after the auction (Illinois, Post-1650 MS 348, 17 May 1807; BL Add MS 22906, ff. 291–2).

SILFORD AND HOLE FARMS (1808)

Despite the difficulties involved in purchasing Fairthorn, Cobbett continued to extend his holdings. In May 1808, he agreed to purchase from a Mr. Hounsom the Farms of Silford and Hole, '67 acres of woods, 5 acres of water meadow and 15 of arable land', at a price of 3,000 guineas for the land and standing timber. The purchase monies were to be provided by bills of exchange payable at 2, 4 and 6 months. The land was 'in a ring fence, and lying close at the back, from one side to the other, of the Manor of Fairthorn, driving trespassers and poachers another half mile from me' (BL Add MS 22907, f. 7). It is not clear when Cobbett completed the purchase, but the final instalment of £300 was not paid until August 1809 (Bodleian, C.33, ff. 22 and 23).

RAGLINGTON AND LOCKHAMS FARMS (1808)

Later in the same year he purchased the farms of Raglington and Lockhams from a William Knight for £11,000. Cobbett claimed in a letter to Wright that this 270-acre farm was 'really worth more than Fairthorn with all its timber on it; for there is still more woods and much

more timber'. Possession was to be taken in May of the following year, and presumably this was when completion was to take place. Again, an accommodation bill was used, but with a view to raising the purchase monies on mortgage: 'I have given farmer Knight a draft for 500£. by way of deposit, upon Bagshaw; but, I shall get the money upon mortgage before the draft be due' (BL Add MS 22907, f. 67). Cobbett was perhaps overly optimistic about the availability of a mortgage. In the event, he does not seem to have paid Knight all the purchase monies until 1813 when, as he recorded in a letter, he had 'paid in cash, 4,800£ to Farmer Knight; and this leaves my Estate my own' (Morgan, MA 13767).

Significantly, the land he was now purchasing from Knight adjoined 'Hounsom's, still running back, and still bounded by the two rivulets' (BL Add MS 22907, f. 67). There was a clear strategy of acquiring additional land to create a compact holding. This not only meant that Cobbett's game (hares and pheasants) were now more secure but the main area of his landholding extended from the River Hamble to north of the Botley to Wickham Road (Fig. 3).

BOTLEY HILL FARM (1811) AND OTHER ACQUISITIONS

Still Cobbett's hunger for land was unabated. He acquired small pieces of land when they became available, including a cottage and some parcels of land in the parish of South Stoneham (Illinois, Post-1650 MS 348, 1820 Statement). And he had still larger purchases in his sights. On 22 May 1810, he wrote to his brother-in-law, Frederick Reid, informing him that he had:

> […] this very day, closed the bargain for an Estate as large as all I now possess; one half of the parish of Durley. Three fine farms, two small ones, and some detached parcels of property, some in house and some in land, including a fine chalk-pit, and having as much timber upon it as I already have. (Nuffield, XXIX/11/1–2)

This transaction did not proceed. Two months later Cobbett was convicted of seditious libel and imprisoned in Newgate for two years (Fig. 4). Not only was he fined and forced to bear the additional expense of hiring private accommodation within the prison, so he could carry on with the *Political Register*, but his credit was destroyed. While in prison he took a lease of the 106-acre Hill Farm at Botley from a Colonel (later Sir) James Kempt, and moved into the farmhouse on his release (he intended to let Botley House) but this transaction represented the last gasp of his land-owning ambitions in Hampshire (Nuffield, XXIX/64/1–2).

ESTATE MANAGEMENT, GAME, PLANTING AND FARMING

Cobbett seems at first to have intended to use the land he acquired for tree-planting and to raise game. According to his daughter, Anne: 'His intention when he first bought land was to plant it all, with various sorts of forest trees …' (Cobbett 1999, 32). At the time of his bankruptcy in 1820, Cobbett claimed that he 'had just got the arable land into the state of a garden'. 'I had, for five years,' he wrote, 'been doing little to the land but to clean, till and manure it; to make fences, drains, and do other things profitable for the time to come' (Illinois, Post-1650 MS 348, 1820 Statement). This demonstrated a future intention to farm much of the land but, during the early years of his ownership, it seems that few crops were grown. In answer to a charge that he had talked up the price of wheat to benefit himself as a farmer, he protested in November 1810 that he had 'never had but *thirty one acres* of wheat in my life' and 'have not, this year, more than enough for the consumption of my own house' (*Political Register*, 17 November 1810, col. 939). This was to change as more land was acquired or otherwise came into his hands – the lease of Fairthorn Farm in favour of John Mears fell in at the end of 1811 – and his financial position became more fraught. Initially, though, he appears to have devoted his time and money to the promotion of game – hares and pheasants – the creation of plantations, and the management of existing woodland, which even on Fairthorn Farm was already in hand, being excluded from Mears' lease (Chun 2001, 12). Indeed, he appears to have conceived of the

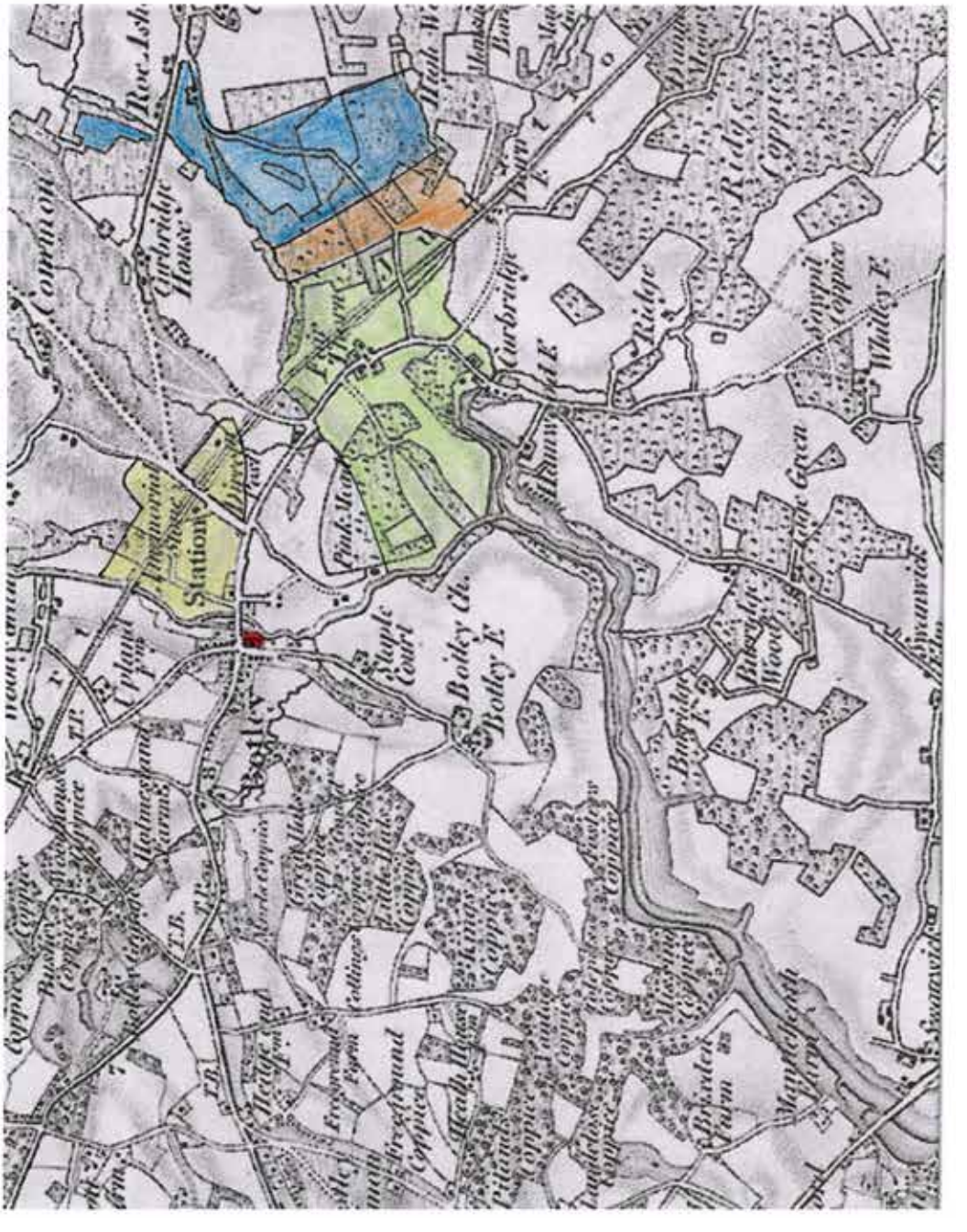

Fig. 3 Map showing approximate extent of William Cobbett's principal landholdings near Botley circa 1811. Botley House (1); Fairthorn Farm (2); Silford and Hole (3); Raglington and Lockhams (4); and Botley Hill Farm (5)

Fig. 4 William Cobbett in Newgate Prison by John Raphael Smith, circa 1812. Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG 6870

greater part of Fairthorn as a preserve for game. He explained the topography of his estate in a letter to his coursing friend, George Mitford, the father of Mary Russell Mitford, in May 1808:

> I have now one hundred and fifty acres of woods and corn-fields, into which no one but myself has a right to enter. The water bounds it on two sides, the Titchfield Road on one side, and I can easily make an impassable fence on the fourth. Here I will, if I live, have a stock of hares and pheasants. The timber will be cleared out, and all will be as tranquil as possible. I shall this fall have my labourers' cottages here and there all around it, and I will not suffer man or dog to enter for the purpose of sporting till I have well stocked it. The rest of my land on the other side of the Titchfield Road (now about two hundred and fifty-six acres) I will sport upon, and it, which consists two-thirds of covers, will soon be well stocked too. There will be no coursing amongst these coppices (L'Estrange 1882, 39).

As the owner of land worth £100 a year, Cobbett obtained a licence under the Game Acts and took great delight in his right to stock and hunt game and the social cachet that attended it. As he told Wright a month later, it would 'be a very pleasant thing to send a dozen brace of hares and pheasants to one's

Fig. 5 A Radical Reformer by Isaac Robert Cruikshank. A hand-coloured etching published December 1819. British Museum, 1862, 1217.527. Image used under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence

friends without trouble' (BL Add MS 31126, ff. 40–41).

In March 1808 he had already started to 'clear out' the timber, selling by auction 372 'large well barked' oak trees and nine elm trees on Fairthorn for £2,670 (Melville 1913, 2, 12; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 22.2.1808). This not only brought a welcome cash receipt, but, following the removal of the large timber, enabled him to grub out the two small areas of woodland called Upper Barn Land and Lower Barn Land Coppices. It is not clear whether this was intended to provide a large open area for coursing or to make room for the plantations that Cobbett was keen to establish. However, although some plantations were established, Cobbett's tree-planting plans were soon curtailed by financial difficulties following his imprisonment. One plantation became overgrown with weeds and was ploughed up while he was in Newgate. *The Woodlands*, Cobbett's own account of the science of tree-planting which was, to a great extent, based on the practical knowledge of planting he had gained while at Botley, was to be a more lasting legacy than any woodland he himself planted (Cobbett, 1828).

From about the time of his imprisonment in 1810, he began to farm his land more intensively. The arable land that he had improved was given over to the extensive growing of corn. In November 1813, he informed fellow farmer and reformer Henry Hunt that he had 'drilled, in fine style, 73 acres of Wheat; and I hope to have 60 more drilled before Christmas' (Adelphi, 22 November 1813). By January of the following year, he was telling Hunt that he had 'enlarged my views as to sowing. I shall sow 250 acres on my own land, and forty five on Kempt's' (Adelphi, 14 January 1814). He had perhaps been encouraged by the good harvest of 1813, after a run of bad ones, but that was only a brief respite. The eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815 adversely affected the climate of the northern hemisphere for a decade, and 1816 was 'the year without a summer'. Cobbett's son, William, wrote on behalf of his father to Hunt in September of that year: 'I think this very rain that is now falling is falling for the cause of Reform; it will certainly be a very strong spoke in the wheel. We have housed no wheat, nor any thing else, except a few peas. All the hay is out yet' (Adelphi, 13 September 1816).

THE LOSS OF COBBETT'S ESTATE

Cobbett struggled on until the following year, when fearing another term in prison, he fled to America. This effectively meant the end of his life at Botley, and of his ambitions to be a large landowner. Much of his debt was by now consolidated and secured by two mortgages over his land, but he was unable to meet his obligations and, in 1820, he was forced to declare himself bankrupt. By this time, the principal mortgagee had already taken possession of his freehold and copyhold land and the lease of Hill Farm had already been forfeited by the landlord. A few months before his bankruptcy, he had petitioned Parliament

for relief, arguing that he had been adversely affected by the legislation passed in 1819 'to provide for the gradual resumption of Cash-Payments by the Bank of England'. If this was a last desperate attempt to fend off insolvency, it fell on deaf ears: the petition was presented and read but 'ordered to lie on the table' (Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/JO/10/8/512). Botley House did not survive Cobbett's lifetime, being demolished in 1832 (*Hampshire Advertiser,* 17 March 1832).

CONCLUSION

It is possible that Cobbett would have weathered the vicissitudes of the post-war period had it not been for the oppressive measures taken against him by various governments. His conviction for seditious libel in 1810 had not only physically removed him from the day-to-day management of his farms but had destroyed his credit, as well as inflicting on him fines and further expenses. Given his principled commitment to the reform movement, the actions of government were to a large extent beyond his control, as were the difficult economic conditions that prevailed following the defeat of Napoleon. After Waterloo, heavily-mortgaged farmers like Cobbett were particularly badly affected, with the real cost of borrowing increasing and the price of agricultural produce falling sharply. One of Cobbett's mortgages linked the sums to be repaid to the value of 3% Reduced annuities, and with such government stock rising gradually, it would have become increasingly difficult for him to repay this (HRO 34M99/3). However, in some respects Cobbett was the author of his own misfortune, and not just through the manner in which he funded his land purchases. No one seems to have claimed that he was a bad farmer, but there was undoubtedly an element of dilettantism in his farming activities. According to Richard Carlisle, 'His farming at Botley consisted in a series of new schemes and projects that were begun to-day and abandoned to-morrow' (*The Republican* 1826, 604–5). Carlisle was no friend to Cobbett, but the latter's ability to 'hurt himself' with his enthusiasms – whether in having merino sheep or for planting trees – was widely recognised, even by his own family. As late as the 1880s, Cobbett's financial misfortunes were as much attributed to his own failings as to the actions of government: 'He went to prison, and he came out a ruined man. His *Register* had been profitable enough, but the money went in Botley House and tree-planting experiments and bad management' (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 14 September 1888).

Ultimately, though, it was his hunger for land that was his undoing. When he could no longer buy land, he rented it, and this impulse lasted for the rest of his life. In this he was not unlike Sir Walter Scott, another of Cobbett's contemporaries ruined by an appetite for land. Thomas Carlyle claimed that it was Scott's 'ambition, and even false ambition' to acquire more and more land that was his undoing (cited in Rowlinson 2010, 218). The same 'false ambition' does appear to have gripped Cobbett, and the ultimate effect of this on his reputation was severe. That he reneged on his debts was a brickbat that was frequently hurled at Cobbett by his political enemies. And his life at Botley soon came to stand not, as he had hoped – as a symbol of a sturdy independence – but instead of financial improvidence. In William Hone's 1819 parody of Byron's *Don Juan*, Juan, by now in England, fails to honour his debts and his family, like Cobbett's, 'so motly/Must first be well established *à la Botley*' (Stanza XIII) (cited in Grande 2014, 216). And Isaac Robert Cruickshank's caricature of the same year *A Radical Reformer* (Fig. 5) encapsulates Cobbett's reputation at this time. It shows him returning from America with Tom Paine's bones. Cobbett is still recognisably a farmer in his dress but his coat, breeches and boots are full of holes, and there is a mention of the subscription he is raising to settle his debts. It was not a situation Cobbett would have foreseen for himself in the more optimistic days of late 1804.

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