

**‘Admirably situated for Building upon’
Ashton Freehold Land Society and
the suburban development of mid-Victorian Preston**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for
the degree of MA (by Research) at the University of Central Lancashire

April 2024

Research Student Declaration

Type of Award: MA (by Research)

School: Psychology and Humanities

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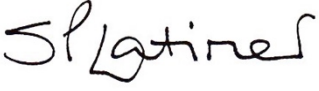
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Abstract

This dissertation examines the impact of the mid-Victorian freehold land society movement on suburban development, through the case study of the Ashton Freehold Land Society, established in Preston, Lancashire. Although brief and now little-known, the movement was for a time politically and socially significant. The prevailing narrative is of freehold land societies driven by Liberal voter creation, working-class self-help, temperance and non-conformism. More recent studies have suggested they were far more diverse in practice, acting as a spur to social mobility, contributing to the development of permanent building societies and anticipating the garden suburbs. The impact of estates created by the freehold land societies is still discernible in the suburban topography of towns and cities, with many recognised as conservation areas.

The evidence for the freehold land society movement and for individual societies is sparse. Limited documentary sources have been supplemented by newspapers, family records, maps, and extensive fieldwork to establish the history of the Ashton society and the people who created and lived on the estate in Ashton-on-Ribble. The case study underpins three main arguments. The first is that the distinctive character of the Ashton Freehold estate results from its origins as a freehold land society. The diversity of its architecture and consequent early social mix can be traced to the movement's evolution from self-help to commercial development. The second argues that joining the society and moving to the estate were significant steps in the owners' and residents' lives in terms of their social status and financial position. Finally, that the establishment of the estate in Ashton-on-Ribble was the point at which the aspirational but unremarkable tradesmen and shopkeepers of Preston first moved to the suburbs.

This study reveals the impact of the freehold land society movement beyond the large cities, showing how it promoted the suburban development of an industrial town. A similar approach might reveal its significance for other smaller towns. The history of a new community on the semi-rural outskirts of town is particularly relevant when Preston is once again expanding into the surrounding fields.

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Acknowledgements

The initial spark for this research was prompted by Steve Walker, my former colleague, who gestured at Ashton Freehold on a map, commenting that he'd always thought it looked like an interesting place – how right he was! And without Ann Hartley, whose dissertation provided the first clues to the development of Ashton Freehold, I would have remained merely intrigued by this fascinating area.

My thanks for the academic encouragement from my supervisor, Dr Keith Vernon, and from Dr Jack Southern, Dr David Hunt and Dr Sam Riches. The hardworking team at Lancashire Archives has suggested sources and pulled out documents for me under the supportive leadership of both Jacquie Crosby and Alex Miller. Dr Alan Crosby prompted Ann Hartley's research 30 years ago and has provided many interesting conversations and research tips. Peter Smith and his Preston History website have offered resources, inspiration, and far too many distractions. Dr Joanna Smith of Historic England kindly shared information and her interest in freehold land societies. Helen Howell has been staunch in her moral support.

I'm grateful to the many residents who have allowed themselves to be accosted, on the street and at the farmer's market, and pumped for information about their houses – in particular those who have shared their deeds, invited me in and continued to show an interest in my research. Angie Milne's work on many Ashton Freehold family histories has made my research far easier than it might have been.

Friends have taken – or convincingly feigned – an interest in my blathering on about Ashton Freehold, often helping me clarify my thoughts in the process. And finally, for their patience at my distractedness, many thanks to John Westwell and to my parents, Gretchen and David Latimer.

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Introduction

Preston's urban boundaries are expanding in the 2020s, as extensive new housing developments cover the rural areas to its north-west. A century and a half earlier, the town first expanded westwards beyond its boundaries onto land 'admirably situated for Building upon' in the rural township of Ashton-on-Ribble. Here, some of Preston's aspirational tradesmen, shopkeepers and builders took the bold step of investing their money and their lives in developing a distinctive new suburb and community as Ashton Freehold Land Society.

The Ashton Freehold estate is now absorbed into Preston, but walking its streets and on maps it stands out – a grid of roads lined with houses in a wide range of styles and, although essentially Victorian, of different periods. It was this distinctiveness that prompted the initial research into the area's origins, and the realisation that its history was barely known and little understood. A passing mention led to Ann Hartley's comparative study of the urbanised areas of Ashton and the revelation that a freehold land society was responsible for the estate's layout and character.¹

The freehold land society movement was a fleeting and largely overlooked moment in the mid-Victorian period, yet it shaped an unknown number of Victorian suburbs scattered across English towns and cities. By the time of Ashton Freehold Land Society's creation in 1859 it had passed its peak and was to become a mere footnote to histories of Chartism, the Anti-Corn Law campaigns, building societies and urban development. Nonetheless, it is gradually becoming recognised as significant in its own right. Gaskell and Home argued that the estates created by freehold land societies should be seen as a key influence in the later garden suburb movement, which until now has traced its history only to the late nineteenth century.² Chase described the

¹ A Hartley, *Ashton-on-Ribble, Preston: The Development of a Suburb, 1860–1914* (dissertation, Lancaster University, 1997).

² SM Gaskell, 'Yorkshire Estate Development and the Freehold Land Societies in the 19th Century', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 43 (1972) p165; RK Home, 'Peri-Urban Informal Housing Development in Victorian England: the Contribution of Freehold Land Societies', *Planning Perspectives*, 25:3 (2010) p366.

freehold land movement as a watershed between the Chartist land schemes and the building societies in expanding the ownership of land.³ This case study of Ashton Freehold Land Society is therefore a contribution to an important aspect of the mid-Victorian period.

The original freehold land societies are generally considered to have evolved from Chartism, working-class self-help, Liberal politics and non-conformist beliefs. In practice, these high ideals were swiftly overcome by more commercial interests. James Taylor of Birmingham founded the movement when in 1847 he adopted the techniques of the Anti-Corn Law League and set up a society to acquire land and enable the members to buy a plot over a period of years.⁴ The aim of the League had been to create owners of sufficient property to qualify them for a vote in county constituencies – assumed to be for the Liberal candidate – and thereby increase support for their campaign in Parliament. The Chartist agricultural land movement had a similar system, but Taylor and the freehold land societies were quick to dissociate themselves from the discredited Feargus O'Connor, whose Chartist aims and outcomes were very different.⁵ Taylor's primary aim, as a reformed alcoholic and secretary of a temperance society, was to divert members' wages from the public houses to an investment in their own futures.⁶ From his first society, the movement spread across Birmingham, and then, as Taylor toured the midlands and north of England spreading his message of temperance and self-help, numerous societies were set up in his wake. However, more commercial interests were quick to see the benefits of buying land at scale and dividing it into individual plots costing less than the market price. By 1851 this first phase of largely idealistic growth outside London was being overtaken by the second, equally short-lived, phase to 1854, which had a more commercial and London focus. After this point, the more political or campaigning sense of a movement seems

³ M Chase, 'Out of Radicalism: the Mid-Victorian Freehold Land Movement', *The English Historical Review*, 106:419 (1991) p345.

⁴ Gaskell, 'Yorkshire Estate Development' (1972) p159; T Beggs, 'Freehold Land Societies', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 16:4 (1853) p339.

⁵ M Chase, "'Wholesome Object Lessons': the Chartist Land Plan in Retrospect", *The English Historical Review*, 118:475 (2003) pp59-85.

⁶ See JE Ritchie, *Freehold Land Societies: their History, Present Position, and Claims* (1853) for the most extensive – and anecdotal – coverage of Taylor's role and personality.

to disappear. One-off freehold land societies, as in Ashton, continued to be created, especially in north-west England, but increasingly expansion was led by the larger societies, such as the National Freehold Land Society. By the end of the 1850s, the sense of a movement – and the newspapers that had briefly accompanied and promoted it – was over.

The history of the freehold land society movement is further obscured by its links to the development of building societies.⁷ The National Freehold Land Society was to evolve into the Abbey National Building Society, and several local building societies such as the Suffolk trace their origins to a freehold land society.⁸ The freehold land societies were in some ways continuing the work of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century building clubs, albeit focused on acquiring land before house-building.⁹ Their misfortune – at least for posterity – was to be caught in the confused and overlapping friendly and building society legislation of the mid-1800s. The early building clubs operated as friendly societies – like the savings and sickness clubs set up to provide mutual support in working communities – but their particular focus on building and owning property led to the first Building Society Act in 1836. The freehold land societies were required to register under this act in order to benefit from an exemption from Stamp Duty and to charge interest. The longstanding registrar of friendly societies, Mr Tidd-Pratt, insisted that the land societies were registered as benefit building societies. Nonetheless most societies, like Ashton Freehold, continued to refer to themselves as land societies, and as a result severed any obvious link with the official record. An additional complication was that, until 1874, building societies were not allowed to own land, leading to convoluted trusteeships or even illegal arrangements in the smaller land societies, while the National society set up the British Land Company to act as the legal purchaser of its estates.

⁷ SJ Price, *Building Societies: their Origin and History* (Franeay & Co, 1959); EJ Cleary, *The Building Society Movement* (Elek Books, 1965).

⁸ I Howlett, *One Hundred and Fifty Years On: a Century and a Half of Ipswich Building Society* (Ipswich Building Society, 1999).

⁹ JG Timmins, 'Early Building Societies in Lancashire', in *Industrial Colonies and Communities*, S Jackson (ed), (The Conference of Teachers of Regional and Local History in Tertiary Education, 1988).

On the ground however, the land societies operated like most building societies. They set out their prospectus, invited shareholders to enrol for a small fee, allocated plots of land, for building or not, and required the investors to attend a monthly subscription meeting until their debt was paid off, usually after ten years. At this point, the land, with or without a building, was officially conveyed to the owner. At the heart of the land societies were these owner-shareholder-members, along with the trustees and committee members who carried out the administrative work, sometimes with professional assistance. It was they who instigated the acquisition and development of the freehold estates. Very soon however there were other influences as original shareholders sold on their plots, owners built their houses and moved onto the estate, or rented out their land or houses to other occupiers. After ten years or so, the society had served its purpose and would either be wound up or move on to developing other estates. The estate then operated within the local housing or land market as any other group of similar houses.

The Ashton Freehold Land Society operated in a similar fashion, though a latecomer to a movement whose heyday had already passed. It emerged in 1859 when there was a flurry of national and local political interest in such societies. Historians however have focused on the earlier or longer-lived societies, and this period, especially in towns rather than the larger cities, has been neglected. This dissertation aims to reveal the overlooked history of the society and the estate it created, situating this new research against the wider freehold land society movement and the suburban development of Preston. In doing so, it will focus primarily on the first two decades when the Ashton Freehold estate was distinctive administratively, socially and geographically from the town of Preston, where it originated (Fig 0.1). Each of these distinctive elements includes one or more key transitional moments that were significant for the development of the Ashton Freehold estate, for the individuals involved, and for Preston's social and residential evolution. In terms of the wider movement, this study aims to revive interest in and challenge some of the standard narratives by providing new insights into an example of the typically smaller, transient freehold land societies in Lancashire.

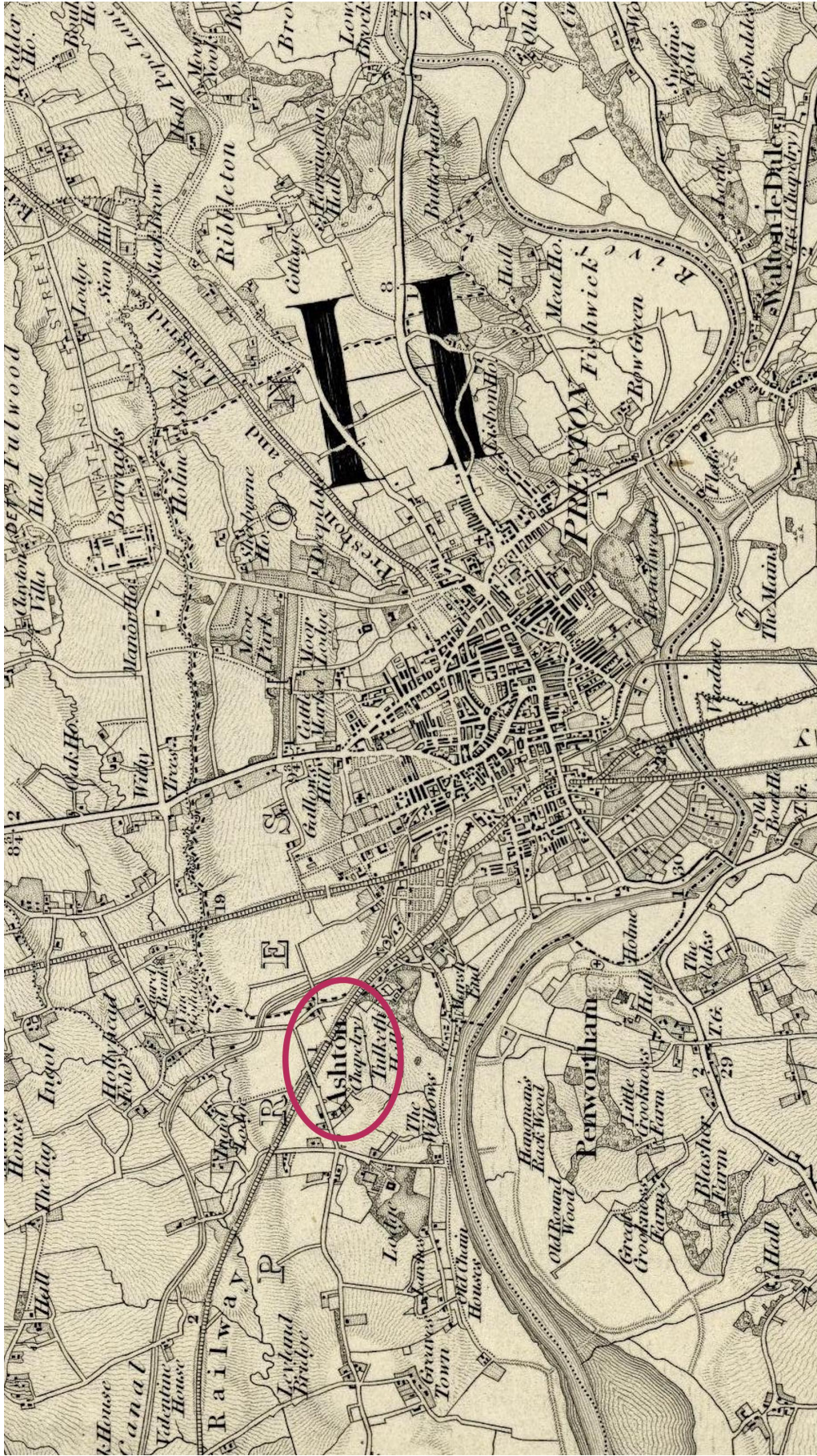


Fig 0.1 Map of Preston and surrounding area in around 1858, showing the location of the Ashton Freehold estate. The dashed line to the right marks the boundary between Ashton and Preston. See Fig 4.1 for a map showing a similar area in 1889. David Rumsey Collection

The existing literature on the freehold land society movement is scanty, with as yet no comprehensive overview. The only modern academic article dealing with the movement's history is by Malcolm Chase.¹⁰ Although his focus was on the early societies and their evolution from Chartism, he provided pointers to the later development of the movement against which Ashton Freehold can be compared. In particular, he suggested that the commonly quoted characteristics of freehold land societies, notably temperance, religion, Liberalism, morals, and class – in particular, working-class 'self-help' – are not as absolute as often stated. These tropes have been largely drawn from the early histories by Beggs and Ritchie, both writing at the peak of the freehold land movement in the 1850s.¹¹ They wrote without the benefit of hindsight and the perspective of time, but remain important as the only historical accounts until the 1960s.

With the rise of urban and working-class history in the 1960s, renewed attention was paid to the freehold land movement. Dyos briefly considered the role of freehold land societies in his influential study of Camberwell, but found little evidence for that area.¹² Gaskell looked in some detail at the West Riding of Yorkshire, where the Chartist land movement inspired numerous smaller societies, in Sheffield particularly.¹³ Chapman and Bartlett investigated the role of the societies in working-class housing in Birmingham, but having outlined their origins, they established that 'those who benefited ... were hardly working class in the commonly accepted sense' and dismissed them from further consideration.¹⁴ Gauldie provided a more nuanced survey of the role of freehold land societies in her history of working-class housing, but concluded that their role was limited.¹⁵ Price and Cleary's histories of the building society movement offer further context for the operation of freehold land societies.¹⁶

¹⁰ Chase, 'Out of Radicalism' (1991).

¹¹ T Beggs, 'Freehold Land Societies' (1853) pp338-46; Ritchie, *Freehold Land Societies* (1853).

¹² HJ Dyos, *Victorian Suburb: a Study of the Growth of Camberwell* (Leicester University Press, 1961) pp114-22.

¹³ Gaskell, 'Yorkshire Estate Development' (1972).

¹⁴ SD Chapman and JN Bartlett, 'The Contribution of Building Clubs and Freehold Land Society [sic] to Working-Class Housing in Birmingham', in *The History of Working-Class Housing*, SD Chapman (ed), (1971) pp232-35.

¹⁵ E Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations: a History of Working-Class Housing, 1780–1918* (Allen and Unwin, 1974).

¹⁶ Price, *Building Societies* (1959); Cleary, *Building Society Movement* (1965).

A revival of interest in specific Victorian suburbs, particularly those in smaller towns, has uncovered other freehold land society estates, often observed primarily through the prism of a building society history or conservation planning.¹⁷ These studies generally rely on the standard narrative for background and focus mainly on foundation, modern survival and a broad socio-economic overview. Locally, Fulwood in Preston provides a useful comparator and will be discussed in some detail.¹⁸ The Freehold estate in Lancaster is less relevant, being part of the National Land Society.¹⁹ Although very different in origin, the industrial colonies identified in north-west England by Marshall and Timmins often evolved similarly to the freehold estates, from peripheral settlements to absorption into a larger settlement.²⁰

Much of the broader literature on suburbs relates to London and the big cities, and is heavily influenced by Dyos' focus as an economic historian on physical development, financing, and the role of infrastructure. Thompson identified four characteristics of suburban histories – the pre-development nature of the land and market forces; the role of transport services; the creation of a mixed social character; and the lengthy process to establish a suburb. This research builds on those elements, as well as the need to investigate the 'previous backgrounds, attitudes, and aspirations' of the new residents.²¹

¹⁷ For example: J Smith, *Freeholders' Home Estate, Eastbourne, Darlington, Durham: Historic Area Assessment*, Historic England Research Report 44 (2012); RK Home, 'Peri-Urban Housing' (2010) pp365-72; B Goodey, *Grimsbury Conservation Area, Banbury: Exploring the Façade of Freehold Land Societies* (Academia, 2007); Exeter City Council Planning Services, *Princes Square Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan* (2006); R Clarke, 'Self-Help, Saving and Suburbanization: the Birkbeck Freehold Land and Building Societies, their Bank, and the London Mechanics Institute 1851–1911', *The London Journal*, 40:2 (2015) pp123-46.

¹⁸ J Boxall, *Suburbanisation: a Case Study of Fulwood Park, Preston, from 1850 into the 1890s* (dissertation, University of Central Lancashire, 1997); C Knight and M Burscough, *Historic Fulwood and Cadley* (Carnegie Publishing, 1998).

¹⁹ M Mehrotra, *The Development of the Freehold Estate in Lancaster c1851–1881* (dissertation, Lancaster University, 1997).

²⁰ JD Marshall, 'Industrial Colonies and the Local Historian', *The Local Historian* 23:3 (1993) pp146-154; G Timmins, 'Textile Colonies and Settlement Growth in Lancashire, c1780–c1850', in *King Cotton: a Tribute to Douglas A Farnie*, JF Wilson (ed), (Crucible Books in association with The Chetham Society, 2009) pp280-304.

²¹ FML Thompson, 'Introduction: The Rise of Suburbia', in *The Rise of Suburbia*, FML Thompson (ed), (Leicester University Press, 1982) p15.

Thompson's reference to the supply of and the market in land for suburban development during the Victorian period has been further developed by later historians. Liddle showed how the landowners in Southport on the Lancashire coast retained their freehold, thereby maintaining control and maximising income through the sale of leases to builders and the collection of annual ground rents.²² Freehold land societies could only be established where owners were prepared to sell their land without such restrictions, which might be prompted by debt or an inheritor keen to liquidate an otherwise burdensome asset. Fitz-Gibbon demonstrated how such factors encouraged the evolution of the property market from private land transactions in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to new business opportunities for auctioneers and estate agents by the mid-Victorian period.²³ This evolution can be seen in Ashton, where the private sale of the Tulketh Hall estate in 1845 led subsequently to a growing market in shares, land, and eventually houses, promoted and arguably exploited for his own advancement by a proto-estate agent.

Fitz-Gibbon concluded with a chapter on the late nineteenth-century campaigners who entered the land market to save common land from development.²⁴ French focused on the earlier enclosure of urban common land, giving Preston as one of his examples. There, the passing of the Municipal Reform Act of 1835 was swiftly followed by the remodelling of Preston Moor's open spaces as a landscaped public park.²⁵ As French remarked, these urban enclosures had a lasting impact on the built environment. In the case of Preston, the creation of Moor Park and the adjacent avenue of large houses was one element of a growing middle-class colonisation of the area to the north of the town.²⁶ Ashton however was outside the town boundaries and any common land had been enclosed much earlier. The availability of land for the

²²J Liddle, 'Estate Management and Land Reform Politics: the Hesketh and Scarisbrick Families and the Making of Southport, 1842 to 1914', in *Patricians, Power and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Towns*, D Cannadine (ed), (Leicester, 1982) pp133- 74.

²³ D Fitz-Gibbon, *Marketable Values: Inventing the Property Market in Modern Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 2018) ch1.

²⁴ Fitz-Gibbon, *Marketable Values* (2018) ch5.

²⁵ H French, 'The Governance of Urban Common Lands in England, 1500–1840' (Working paper, 2017) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321685425> [Downloaded 15 December 2023].

²⁶ Proximity to Moor Park may have prompted the choice of Fulwood for the first local freehold land society estate.

development of the Ashton Freehold estate is more closely linked to the financial misfortunes of the local landowner, which prompted a sale.

Thompson also identified a need to extend the histories of suburban development into an examination of the 'previous backgrounds, attitudes, and aspirations' of the new residents.²⁷ The social origins of the freehold land society movement – in 'Dissent, temperance, and liberalism; ... the self-help ethic' – are rarely covered in depth.²⁸ The broader literature on Victorian suburbs was written at a time of limited access to census data beyond 1851, or it deals mainly with the late-Victorian period. The key period for Ashton Freehold therefore falls into something of a gap in coverage, perhaps because it was a time of socio-economic change, political party turmoil, religious expansion and is generally hard to pin down.²⁹ Much attention is focused on either 'working-class' or 'middle-middle-class' suburbs, and the 'shopkeepers and small-scale manufacturers' of this period have failed to 'excite' academic interest.³⁰ Histories of individual suburbs tend to deal with residents or with builders and investors, but do not generally combine the two, as here.³¹

Suburbs have attracted multi-disciplinary interest more recently. Of particular note are Forsyth's urban-planning attempt to define the essential elements of a suburb, which provide a structure for the main themes identified by historians, and McManus and Ethington's longitudinal approaches.³² The latter proposed that suburbs evolve, embodying both continuity and change as they 'embed', and so focus on newness is too limiting. Secondly, they connected changes in society and social life with those of the built environment in a revised concept of 'urban morphologies'. And finally, they

²⁷ FML Thompson, 'The Rise of Suburbia' (1982) p15.

²⁸ Chase, 'Out of Radicalism' (1991) p326.

²⁹ G Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851–75* (Fontana, 1979).

³⁰ H Barker, H, *Family and Business during the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2017) p227.

³¹ Examples of different approaches include: JM Rawcliffe, 'Bromley: Kentish Market Town to London Suburb, 1841–81' in *The Rise of Suburbia*, FML Thompson (ed), (Leicester University Press, 1982); C French, 'Housing the Middle Classes in Late Victorian and Edwardian Surbiton', *The Local Historian*, 45:2 (2015) pp126-42; A Skinner, 'Unearthing the Past: an Exploration into the People behind the Development of a Victorian Suburb', *Family and Community History* 12:2 (2009) pp84-100.

³² A Forsyth, 'Defining Suburbs' *Journal of Planning Literature* 27:3 (2012) pp270–81; R McManus and P Ethington, 'Suburbs in Transition: New Approaches to Suburban History', *Urban History*, 34:2 (2007) pp317-37.

argued that there is a 'suburban life-cycle' whereby generational change impacts on a suburb's built environment and its character. These considerations permeate the chapters that follow.

The sources for the freehold land society movement overall are as scanty as the literature, and rest mainly on newspapers, including those published for the movement in the 1850s, and the histories and articles written at the time. A few societies have extensive archives, especially those that are still building societies today, but most depend on the chance survival of ephemera. The sole original source for the Ashton Freehold Land Society is the Rules booklet in the Friendly Societies records at the National Archives. Otherwise, the account below is a piecing together of newspaper references, censuses, directories, maps, photographs, deeds, planning applications, family histories, and other chance finds that helped shed light on the society, the estate and the people involved. These have been collated and cross-referenced in order to establish the overall picture presented here. However, it is necessarily incomplete, and some assumptions may be overturned by new evidence that continues to emerge. Specific sources are referenced in the footnotes. The key source, however, is Ashton Freehold itself which has provided both questions and answers, provocations, and validations or otherwise of documentary sources.³³ This fieldwork is at the heart of the research.

The structure of this dissertation is prompted by some of the issues raised in the literature discussed above and seeks to describe the history of Ashton Freehold through three transitional moments that seem to distinguish it from similar narratives. The first chapter deals with the founding of Ashton Freehold Land Society, and is unusual in covering its subsequent administrative history. The research demonstrates a more complex picture of such societies than is generally revealed. A key argument is that, one year after its foundation, a pivotal moment changed the character of the society and consequently that of the estate. Beggs, the 1850s statistical historian, had

³³ G Timmins, 'Assessing Accommodation Standards in the Early Victorian Period' in *Urban Politics and Space in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Regional Perspectives*, BM Doyle (ed), (Cambridge Scholars, 2007) pp118-33.

already identified a tension between small, 'amateur' societies and more 'professional' or commercial interests. Similar issues seem to have played out in an effective takeover of the society by an up-and-coming land agent, which placed greater control on the type and number of houses. The challenges of the ill-defined building society legislation also influenced the society's early history and had long-term consequences. The standard narrative of religion, politics, temperance and class is applied to the origins of the society, and is found to have some validity, but with greater diversity, in line with Chase's conclusion. Politics appear to have influenced the emergence of not just the Ashton society but two others at this time, if not in the vote-seeking manner of the better-known society in Fulwood ten years earlier.

The next two chapters focus on the people involved in Ashton Freehold, using not only the census evidence of residents as in other studies, but also identifying owners and investors. For all but the most wealthy or confident, they must have taken something of a gamble, whether it was a financial or a personal investment in the estate. For those who moved to the new development, it was a significant step out of town to live on a building site for years to come. This physical transition was also potentially a social one, and the first of these chapters attempts to establish the socio-economic status of the estate and its residents and owners, and any changes over the first twenty-five years. The key literature on freehold land societies reflected the mid-Victorian and later twentieth-century periods in which it was written and categorised the resultant estates as working-class or middle-class. This binary characterisation is of its times, and urban historians in particular examined the subject primarily through the prism of 'labour history' and 'history from below'.³⁴ In order to discuss the frequent perception of Ashton-on-Ribble as middle-class, it seemed appropriate to use similar methodologies to those in the literature to analyse the social character of the estate. Armstrong's classifications based on occupation data were therefore taken as a starting point, as well as later approaches considering servants and identity.³⁵ None is

³⁴ K Navickas, 'What Happened to Class? New Histories of Labour and Collective Action in Britain', *Social History*, 36:2 (2011) pp192-204.

³⁵ WA Armstrong, 'The Interpretation of the Census Enumerators' Books for Victorian Towns', in *The Study of Urban History*, HJ Dyos (ed), (Edward Arnold, 1968) pp67-85.

entirely satisfactory, but considered together they allow an attempt at a more nuanced approach to a period of significant social transformation and movement. For these reasons, this research will use the terms of class as a necessary shorthand, in line with the literature. This chapter ends with an attempt at further contextualisation by looking at the financial implications of society membership and living and building on the estate. Significantly, it appears that its origins as a freehold land society served to create a distinctive social profile, driven by the aspirational opportunities of land ownership.

The following complementary chapter examines the question of lifestyle transition through the lens of networks, women's experiences, and finally the possible motivations and aspirations for an individual's investment in Ashton Freehold. It will show that for many this was both personal and financial, making a long-term commitment to life on the estate. It demonstrates the validity of the argument that freehold land society estates were often early examples of the garden suburb.

The final chapter returns to Preston and the 1850s to consider what this account of Ashton Freehold adds to the history of Preston's suburban development. In particular, it responds to a question on transition posed by Bristow as to when Preston's 'middle classes (and especially the shopkeepers)' moved out of the town centre. In doing so, comparison is drawn with the earlier Fulwood Freehold estate and its residents to argue that the answer is the creation of Ashton Freehold.

Overall, this dissertation aims to provide new insights into the histories of Ashton-on-Ribble, of Preston, and of the freehold land society movement through a wide-ranging account of Ashton Freehold Land Society and the distinctive estate it created. The Ashton society appears to sit in the middle ground between the early examples of working-class 'self-help' societies and the commercially driven societies that evolved subsequently. Through an unusually deep investigation of the administration of the land society and its estate, coupled with a longitudinal study of its development and its residents and owners, this research reveals a less polarised movement. It both confirms the political, religious and social diversity of freehold land societies and

demonstrates how, in Ashton, this created an estate that provided opportunities for a broad range of men and women to establish themselves. The mechanism of a freehold land society enabled shopkeepers and small tradesmen in particular to establish themselves as property owners within a growing lower middle-class. The study also sheds light on the formation of a new community and how it was managed outside the structures of local town government. Similar research into other individual societies, especially after the movement's heyday and in towns rather than cities, would contribute to a broader understanding of 'self-help' and the prompts for suburban development in the mid-Victorian period. It might also influence the focus on sense of place and community-building on the recently expanding edges of today's towns.

Chapter 1

Ashton Freehold – a land society in transition

Introduction

The history of Ashton Freehold Land Society begins in late 1859, more than a decade after the first flourishing of the movement. It is a confused and confusing history thanks to the limited and disparate sources for the society. This confusion is a thread running through the development of the Ashton Freehold estate – the evolving social, legislative and economic picture of its early years creating tensions between the ‘amateur’ general membership and the intervention of more commercially-minded interests. Beggs had already identified this tension between inexperienced and probably idealistic society members and the professional agents and investors, who increasingly took an interest in the commercial opportunities of the freehold land society movement.¹ For the small ‘amateur’ societies, such as Ashton, the seemingly simple operation to buy and share out land became a fraught negotiation of differing expectations and an administrative challenge exacerbated by poor building society legislation.

The chapter will take a broadly chronological path through the history of the Ashton society, concentrating primarily on its establishment and early development. The first three sections cover the process of creating the society, who was involved, and what might have prompted a sudden flurry of freehold land societies locally. In so doing, they will discuss how typical Ashton Freehold’s origins were. The following two sections address the pivotal point when the society appears to have changed from amateur to professional, with a consequent impact on both its social and built characteristics. The society itself then more or less vanishes from the record, apart from two attempts to wind it up in the 1870s and the 1930s. These events end the chapter, adding further weight to the conclusion that Ashton Freehold Land Society was in many ways an embodiment of the different facets of the short-lived freehold land society movement.

¹ Beggs, ‘Freehold Land Societies’ (1853) p342.

Setting up Ashton Freehold

The procedural and legislative establishment of Ashton Freehold Land Society appears typical of the movement, but nonetheless reveals the first signs of confusion. The only official documentation is in the archives of the Registry of Friendly Societies, where it is recorded as the Ashton Benefit Building Society, a name that remained unused locally.² Otherwise, the history of its foundation can only be traced through newspaper notices and reports.

The first reference to Ashton Freehold appears in early September 1859, with a notice promoting the 'First Public Meeting' of the society and stating that it had just acquired twenty-five acres of land from the Tulketh Hall estate (Fig 1.1).³ The land had been advertised for sale in June that year as – on this occasion – 'eligibly situated for building purposes'.⁴ Originally included in the sale of the whole Tulketh Hall estate in 1850, it had failed to sell as part of a large lot stretching from the river Ribble to the Preston and Wyre Railway line, although sections were later sold off piecemeal.⁵ Following the 1850 auction, the owner, John Abel Smith, had commissioned local surveyors Park, Son and Garlick to lay out new roads across the unsold farmland on the elevated part of his estate. Such preliminary works were a typical move by nineteenth-century landowners seeking to benefit from the expanding towns by encouraging speculative building development.⁶ In Ashton it had been partially successful, and by 1859, the land bounded by the new roads had been cut into at the corners by a large private house and garden, and a five-storey cotton spinning mill (Fig 1.2).

² National Archives (hereafter TNA) FS 6/118/809/LANC Rules of the Ashton Benefit Building Society, 1859. The multiplicity of names associated with Ashton Freehold is a challenge. Alongside the two 'official' society names, it also appears in newspapers as Ashton Land Society and Ashton Freehold Society. The estate was initially called 'The Tulketh Park', but more commonly referred to as Ashton Freehold Estate and Ashton Park (causing confusion with the Pedder country house of that name).

³ *Preston Guardian* (hereafter *PG*), 10 September 1859.

⁴ *Preston Chronicle* (hereafter *PC*), 18 June 1859.

⁵ Lancashire Archives (hereafter LA), CBP 79/14 Particulars and plan of estate of Tulketh and notice of auction, 28 June 1850.

⁶ *PC*, 7 June 1851; Rawcliffe, 'Bromley' (1982) p42.

ASHTON FREEHOLD LAND SOCIETY.

TRUSTEES :

Mr. Richard Carr, corn merchant, Back-lane.
Mr. Richard Dixon, leather merchant, Church-street.
Mr. John Woods, tobacconist, Old Shambles.

COMMITTEE :

Mr. James Chetwin, Ribble-place, President.
Mr. Thomas Dewhurst, Gentleman, Lune-street.
Mr. Richard Duckett, Town Councillor, Friargate.
Mr. John Howarth, Temperance Hotel, Fishergate.
Mr. Thomas Singleton, Gas Office.
Mr. John Bibby, cashier, (Messrs. Wm. Humber & Co.)
Mr. John Yates, manager, (Messrs. Gardner & Co.)

SURVEYORS :

Messrs. Park, Son, and Garlick, Winckley-square.

SOLICITORS :

Messrs. Turner and Son, Fox-street.

HONORARY SECRETARY :

Mr. John Howarth.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY :

Mr. John Jackson, Ribble-place.

Shares payable by fortnightly subscriptions of 4s. each ;
entrance fee 1s. per share.

This Society has been established under the provisions
of the Friendly Societies Acts, the Officers appointed, and
the Rules duly approved.

The Society has just concluded a purchase of twenty-
five acres of a beautiful portion of the Tulketh Hall Estate,
in Ashton, admirably situated for Building upon, and
commanding extensive views over the Ribble, and the at-
tention of those who are desirous to have a residence in a
very salubrious part of the outskirts of the town is par-
ticularly requested to the eligibility of the site.

The Estate, which is proposed to be called "The
Tulketh Park," will be allotted amongst the Members
without delay, and therefore early applications for Shares
are requested to be made, as there are already a consider-
able number of Shares taken.

The FIRST PUBLIC MEETING for the Payment of
Subscriptions will be held at Mr. Howarth's, Temperance
Hotel, Fishergate, Preston, on Thursday Evening next,
(8th September), at eight o'clock, and to receive further
applications for shares.

JOHN HOWARTH, Honorary Secretary.

JOHN JACKSON, Assistant Secretary.

Preston, 3rd September, 1859.

Fig 1.1 Notice of the first meeting of Ashton Freehold Land Society, *Preston Guardian*, 10 September 1859.

The first public meeting of Ashton Freehold Land Society was held on 8 September 1859 at Mr Howarth's Temperance Hotel on Fishergate, where the initial 250 shares were oversubscribed. The following day, the society announced the additional purchase of ten acres, offered by Thomas Walmsley who had bought them previously from the Tulketh Hall estate. This land to the north of the initial plot provided a boundary to Long Lane (now Blackpool Road).⁷ With thirty-five acres of land at its disposal, the society was able to advertise a second meeting a week later for subscribers to take up a further hundred shares.

⁷ PC, 10 September 1859.

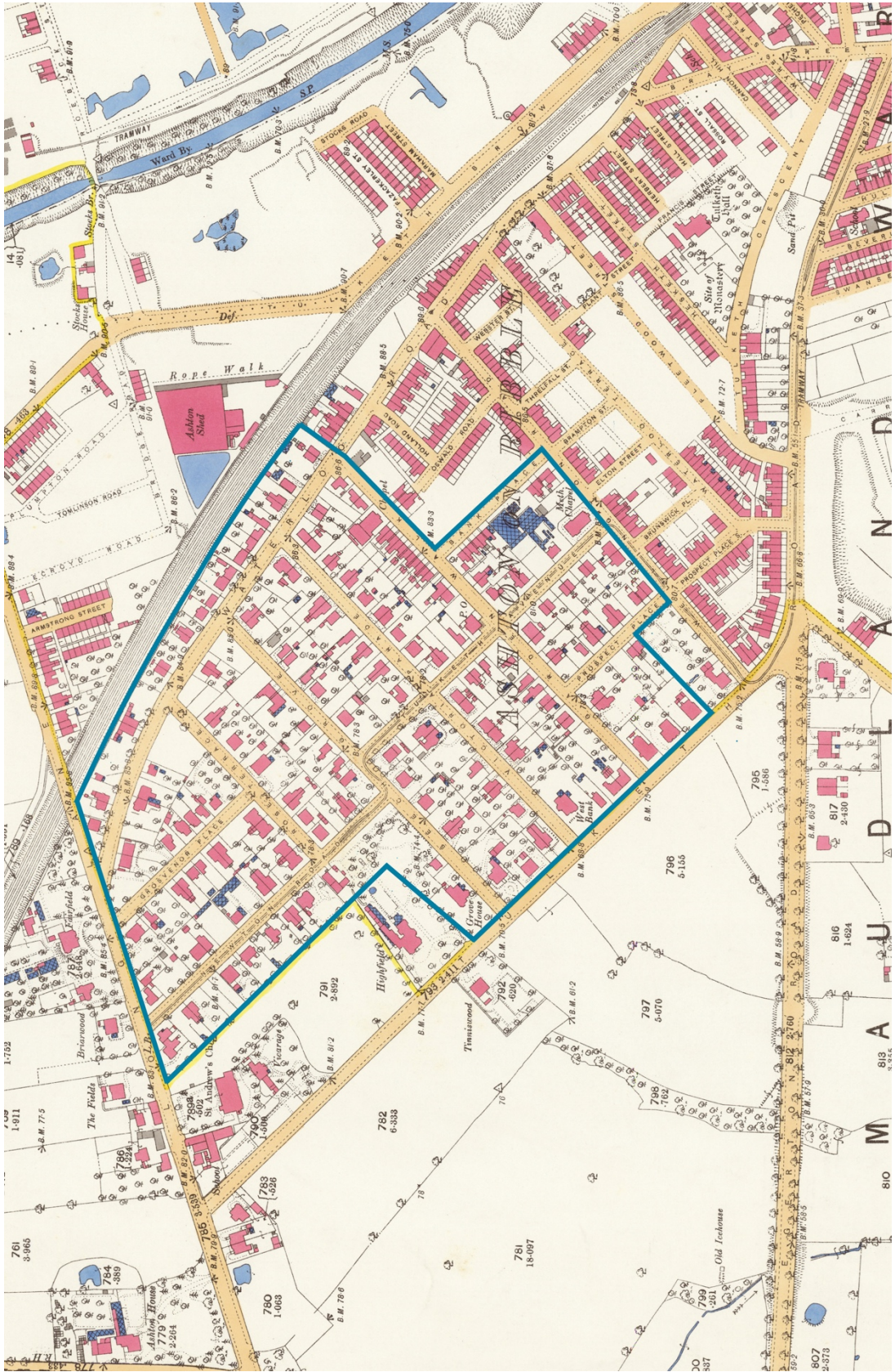


Fig 1.2 Map of urban Ashton in 1890 showing the boundary of the Ashton Freehold estate. The mill was on the site bounded by Holland and Oswald Roads. National Library of Scotland

Meanwhile the Rules of the society had been printed and on 15 September 1859, the Registrar of Friendly Societies certified and signed them. The Ashton society's Rules are similar to model rules published by the Treasury in 1838 and to the procedures adopted by most early building clubs.⁸ The stated aim was 'to enable each member to receive out of the funds of this society the amount of value of his share or shares therein ... to erect or purchase one or more dwelling house or houses, or other real or leasehold estate'. The wording closely echoes the model rules, although the price of a single share was £50, rather than the usual £120 for building society shares, reflecting the lower cost of land. The procedures for meetings, appointing trustees and committees, taking fees and administering fines are typical, though significantly less detailed than the Rules of the Borough Benefit Building Society set up shortly afterwards. This difference is an early indication of the more 'amateur' approach of the Ashton society, set up above all to help members acquire land at a reduced price. The business-like Borough society was promoted as a well-managed investment vehicle, with JH Longworth (of whom more later) as its professional secretary. The Borough society advertisements make clear it was set up as a terminating society, whereas the Ashton Rules omit the model statement on 'Termination of the Society'.⁹ Its omission also suggests a lack of forethought and would later cause confusion. Typically, terminating building societies aimed to wind up after around ten years, when borrowers had paid up and investors received their returns. The freehold land societies are seen as an influential step towards the permanent model, which allowed for more flexible timescales and membership.¹⁰ Probably unintentionally, the Ashton society was a part of that transition.

In broad terms therefore, the Ashton Freehold Land Society was set up using similar procedures to the earlier building clubs and contemporaneous land and buildings societies. The next section will consider whether its founders also fit the stereotypes of

⁸ Anon, *Instructions for the Establishment of Benefit Building Societies, with Rules and Forms of Mortgages, &c. Applicable Thereto* (HMSO, 1838).

⁹ LA, DDPR 37/110 Borough Benefit Building Society Rules, 1860; PC, 21 April 1860.

¹⁰ Chase, 'Out of Radicalism' (1991) p339.

Liberal, non-conformist, abstaining, hard workers that characterise descriptions of the freehold land society movement.

The public face of Ashton Freehold

Who then was behind Ashton Freehold Land Society? The first notice listed the trustees, committee, secretaries, surveyors and solicitors, enabling the following biographical details to be found from a range of sources.¹¹ The three trustees were Richard Carr, a corn merchant, John Woods, a tobacconist, and Richard Dixon, a leather merchant. The first two voted for the Conservative candidates in the elections of 1859 and 1862, the last for the Liberal candidates (although also for a loosely aligned Conservative in 1859). In religion, Carr was Catholic and the others Anglican. None are known to be temperance followers, but clearly nor did they object to meeting at a temperance hotel. The two Conservatives were town councillors. All were apparently successful in business at the time, and while not in need of help themselves, two were known for their charitable donations, and the other 'was a very useful and attentive member on committees'.¹² The seven committee members comprised a brass finisher, a former corn miller, an auctioneer, a temperance hotel owner, a collector for the Gas Office, and a cashier and a manager in cotton mills. Politically they were the reverse of the trustees; four voted Liberal and two Conservative. The other – the gas employee – was a lodger and as such ineligible, although he claimed an apparently unused vote as the owner of six small freehold houses.¹³ Religious affiliation is more difficult to determine, but three were probably Anglican, two were Baptist, one Catholic and one cannot be determined. As for temperance, it seems reasonable to assume that the two Baptists avoided alcohol for religious reasons, and that the temperance hotel owner also abstained.

¹¹ *PC*, 10 September 1859. Specific sources used: LA, DDX 2422/acc10214/Box15/172 Poll lists 1859, 1862, 1868; 1851 and 1861 censuses; electoral register, 1860.

¹² *Preston Herald* (hereafter *PH*), 9 June 1866.

These men were the public face of Ashton Freehold Land Society in 1859 and are presumed to have taken the initiative to form the society – there is no suggestion of other interests lurking behind them. The differences in their politics, religion and likely attitude to alcohol align with Chase’s findings that there was far greater diversity in the freehold land society movement than its stereotypes suggest. The challenges of socio-economic status will be discussed in the next chapter, but it appears that at this point in their lives all ten men are somewhere on a trajectory to lower middle-class status. None feature in histories of Preston or as significant characters in the town’s life – even the trustees are variously described in their obituaries as ‘quiet’, ‘attentive’ and ‘unassuming’.¹⁴ These are not the ‘establishment’ figures usually invited to give confidence to investors.

Assuming therefore that the society’s promoters were drawn from no particular group, what prompted its formation in late 1859? Two other societies were being advertised at that time, which suggests the movement was experiencing a revival. The next section will consider why this occurred, first briefly considering the history of the freehold land society movement in Preston.

Freehold land societies – a political moment in 1859

It is truer to talk of the movement’s history being just outside Preston, as all four freehold land societies promoted within the town were focused on land beyond its boundaries. The first dates from the heyday of freehold land societies, and accounts of its foundation initially appear to fulfil the typical narrative of workers’ self-help and franchise. In January 1850, a meeting was held to explain the principles of the movement and establish a Preston Freehold Land Society. The notice described the object of buying land at a wholesale price to sell at cost to members, and so provide ‘tradesmen and industrious operatives’ with the opportunity to hold land for gardening or to build a ‘Cottage’. The qualification for a county vote was mentioned,

¹⁴ Obituaries: *PC*, 2 January 1869; *PH*, 9 June 1866; *PH*, 19 September 1874.

and in addition to ‘the moral, social and political advantages’ the society offered ‘a Safe Investment for Capital, at a fair rate of interest’, land always increasing in value adjacent to ‘manufacturing towns’. The meeting was attended by Preston’s Liberal MP, Sir George Strickland, and James Taylor, the Birmingham champion of the freehold land society movement. The speeches reiterated the benefits for working men, and the meeting closed with the decision to set up the Preston Freehold Land Society. The report said around 130 shareholders had signed up that evening.¹⁵

However, in a very swift turnaround, the Rules of the Preston Freehold Land Society presented to a meeting three weeks later stated that fortnightly subscriptions would be three shillings – twice the amount originally emphasised.¹⁶ By early March, Horrocks’ Farm in Fulwood had been bought, and proposals announced to divide its forty-five acres into over 300 plots of 500 to 600 square yards each. A year after the initial meeting, a ballot was drawn allocating 335 plots to 183 shareholders, almost two plots each. This ratio of 54% members to shares is more typical of the National Land Society; in the smaller regional societies it was often over 70%.¹⁷ A maximum of five plots was allowed, and a bookseller and a schoolmaster were the first and last to be drawn.¹⁸ The subsequent development of what was known originally as Freehold Park was slow – only forty households were resident in the 1861 census a decade later – but its future as a desirable suburb for wealthier, higher-status families was already becoming apparent. The final chapter will examine this in greater detail, but it did not go unchallenged at the time. A letter from Simeon Hooton of Cannon Street was published in November 1850 questioning the layout of the Freehold Park and saying that ‘the society was formed entirely to benefit the working man’ who ‘has to earn his livelihood by the sweat of his brow, and has to scheme and contrive how to raise his fortnightly subscription’.¹⁹ Hooton may have been motivated to write as a speculative builder as much as a ‘working man’, but his letter demonstrates a gap between the rhetoric of the society’s foundation and its future.

¹⁵ *PC*, 2 February 1850.

¹⁶ *LA*, DDPR 37/104 Proposed Rules for the Preston Freehold Land Society, 1850.

¹⁷ Chase, ‘Out of Radicalism’, p340.

¹⁸ *PC*, 1 February 1851.

¹⁹ *PC*, 9 November 1850.

Nonetheless, the political context associated with freehold land societies was not forgotten. In mid-1851 – around the time that the electoral registers for the following year were drawn up – there were at least two queries to the editor of the *Preston Chronicle* about the right of the Fulwood Freehold members to vote.²⁰ A year later, the *Chronicle* published a note saying that the Fulwood freehold land society had only added a single – Liberal – vote to the North Lancashire electoral register in 1851, but would add fifteen – eleven Liberal and four Conservative – in 1852.²¹

While the establishment of the Fulwood Freehold estate was clearly linked to some extent to the desire to create voters, this intention was not overtly stated in the flurry of new freehold land societies created around Preston ten years later. The first to be announced in August 1859 was the Ribbleton Freehold Land Society, set up with some fanfare, although its land around Cromwell Road to the east of Preston was never fully developed.²² Neither Ashton Freehold nor the Ribbleton society proclaimed a political agenda, and the latter's slow development meant few, if any, new voters before the extension of the franchise in 1868. Just two weeks after the Ribbleton society emerged, and possibly goaded into action as a result, Ashton Freehold Land Society was established. In October, the briefest of notices for a Penwortham Freehold Land Society is the only reference to the third.²³

If none of these later societies were motivated by political aims, it does seem probable that their formation was prompted by the intense national and local debates about the Reform Bill promoted by Lord Derby's Conservative government earlier the same year. Speeches in parliament linked proposals to remove the 40-shilling franchise from the counties to a negative impact on the freehold land societies, so the Bill's failure may have galvanised new interest in the movement. It is also possible that this latest attempt to expand the franchise had particular resonance in Preston, where, prior to the 1832 Reform Act, all men had a vote. Almost thirty years later, unless they already

²⁰ *PC*, 14 June, 26 July 1851.

²¹ *PC*, 31 July 1852.

²² *PC*, 27 August 1859; TNA, FS 6/119/817/LANC Rules of the Preston and Ribbleton Benefit Building Society, 1859.

²³ *PC*, 22 October 1859.

qualified under the 'old franchise' or were eligible for the new franchise, many men had no vote.²⁴ It is possible that the fathers of those promoting the revived interest in freehold land societies had been 'old franchise' voters, so some may have felt sentimentally as well as politically engaged with the debates. It was the failure of this Reform Bill that led to an election in April 1859.

The Preston poll lists for this and subsequent elections have enabled the identification of some individuals' political affiliations.²⁵ Other than the committee, only a few of the early Ashton Freehold members or residents are known and identifiable. They too, however, present a largely balanced picture with nine voting Conservative and nine Liberal. It is obvious that Ashton Freehold Land Society was not beholden to any particular political creed. It is also difficult to make the case, from the evidence available, that anyone was motivated to take shares in Ashton Freehold Land Society in order to gain the vote. It is possible that some might have seen an opportunity for a second vote. Samuel Wilson, a Cannon Street draper and first to build on the estate, already had a borough vote which he exercised for the Liberal candidates in the 1859, 1862 and 1868 elections. By 1865 he was claiming a county vote for his houses on Bank Place, which he presumably also cast for the Liberal party. Joseph Shaw, another Cannon Street resident, claimed a borough vote which he cast for the Liberal, Grenfell, and the Conservative, Cross, in 1859. He had another vote in the county based on his four houses on Garden Walk Terrace, and his son-in-law John Crompton also had a vote based on ownership – through his wife – of one of those houses.

At a meeting with the Boundary Commissioners in October 1867, the town clerk said he believed the houses on Ashton Freehold were 'all rated sufficiently high to give a county vote' under the revised franchise.²⁶ In the 1870-71 electoral register for Ashton, there were twenty owners and fourteen occupiers of land or houses on Ashton Freehold, who claimed a vote in the North Lancashire constituency. Of these, the

²⁴ C Hardwick, *History of the Borough of Preston and its Environs in the County of Lancaster* (Preston, 1857), ch7.

²⁵ LA, DDX 2422/acc10214/Box15/172 Poll lists 1859, 1862, 1868.

²⁶ PH, 12 October 1867.

political persuasion of ten can be assumed from the 1868 Preston poll list – five Liberal and five Conservative.²⁷ The estate itself has no political resonances in its street names as occurs elsewhere – just one early house was named Bright Place, possibly in homage to the Anti-Corn Law League hero and Liberal, John Bright. Remarkably few residents or property owners bothered to register for a vote in the first decade – some may have been satisfied with votes based on Preston qualifications, but there is certainly no sense of political urgency. Overall, Ashton Freehold bears out Chase’s view that politics was just one factor in freehold land society membership.²⁸

The first year – debates and tensions

The diverse backgrounds and interests within the society can be detected in its first year of operation, when the thirty-five-acre site was laid out, plots were allocated and some members began to build.²⁹ The resulting tensions and ways in which these impacted on the character of the estate are the focus of this section. The management of the society was in the hands of the trustees and committee discussed above. One of the trustees had served on the committee of the Fulwood freehold land society, but otherwise nothing has been found to connect them with previous involvement in running similar organisations. They were therefore typical of the earlier land and building societies led by ‘amateurs’, albeit with professional solicitors and surveyors in support. These were the societies, most common in north-west England, that generally focused on a single project, and on completion were ‘terminated’.

The Rules required subscription meetings every four weeks, which were probably the occasion for the debates accompanying decisions on the final layout. No plan of the layout and allotments has been found, so fieldwork and the connecting of diverse references has been necessary to establish the course of development. As shown in

²⁷ This is open to challenge as a methodology, but no records survive for the county polls. A more accurate analysis may be possible as new evidence of owners/occupiers emerges.

²⁸ Chase, ‘Out of Radicalism’ (1991) pp325-6.

²⁹ Members held one or more shares, each equivalent to a plot or an allotment.

Fig 1.2, the thirty-five acres bought for the estate formed a rough quadrilateral shape, bounded by three roads and the railway line, with its corners cut into by the church and its land, the solitary house built in the 1850s, the cotton mill and the area around it, and the curve of the Preston and Wyre Railway line.³⁰ The land sat on a plateau above the river Ribble, with little variation in height apart from a small dip following the line of a stream. Unlike some suburban estates, little in the layout references the original field structure – the only connection was the retention of a bridge linking fields divided by the railway, which was accessed between houses on Waterloo Road.³¹ This road provides the only curve in the layout, which is otherwise a grid pattern.

The railway and the cotton mill had already introduced elements of industrialisation into what was purely farmland in 1848.³² The northerly part was still being farmed from Blackburn Barn Farm until a sale of cattle and equipment took place in January 1860 as the land was 'required for building purposes'.³³ However, it also seems possible that the Board of Health's Ashton Brick Works was operating on part of the estate. Notices in March 1860 advertised the sale of over a million bricks on the 'late brickmaking premises at Ashton', which had to be vacated by 1 May.³⁴ Even if not on the estate itself, this suggests that the land chosen was far from a rural idyll, which may have dissuaded some potential shareholders.

The layout provided one plot per membership share, each around 400 square yards or roughly one tenth of an acre – about 25% smaller than at Fulwood. The highest plot number identified is 334, allowing around an acre for the roads. They were numbered from south to north, with long rectangular plots on much of the grid, and a greater

³⁰ The mill was built in 1856 and the land immediately adjacent was included in the 1859 sale. The society appears to have rejected this area in order to create a buffer between the estate and the mill. The land was put up for sale again in October 1859, but remained in John Abel Smith's ownership until at least 1880.

³¹ The extensive Highfield estate on Tulketh Road now spans the original Ashton Freehold boundary, concealing the angled line of field edges at the rear of the demolished Grove House. LA, DDCC/Acc2880/P13 Conveyance J A Smith and others to E Pedder, 1 September 1853.

³² Lancashire, Sheet LXI, surveyed 1844-47 (Ordnance Survey, 1849).

³³ PC, 7 January 1860.

³⁴ PC, 3 and 10 March 1860. Nothing has yet emerged to locate the brickworks more definitely. The brick clay mentioned in sales notices for the Tulketh Hall estate was certainly exploited south of Wellington Road on land owned by Richard Threlfall, PC, 22 November 1856.

variety of shapes accommodating the curve of Waterloo Road. In January 1860, the *Preston Guardian* reported that the houses were to be twenty feet from the roads, which were thirty-six feet wide, and that there would be a nine-foot-wide back street behind the plots.³⁵ The question of back streets was a significant issue in Preston at the time, where measures to improve housing were met by opposition from interested parties. Following the Public Health Act of 1848, Preston had promoted through-passages between every two terraced houses to reach the back yards, but it was 1880 before a by-law was passed to make back streets obligatory.³⁶ The matter clearly exercised the Ashton Freehold members and debates were carried onto the newspaper's correspondence pages. John Greenall, a bookkeeper living near the canal wharf, shared a letter he had sent to the committee, arguing that back streets would take up too much space and disadvantage poorer owners with no need for access for a carriage or stables. His opinion was countered two weeks later by 'A Four Shares Subscriber' arguing that the sanitary improvements of back streets were worthwhile in themselves and would increase the value of property regardless of the loss of land. The latter cited the importance of improving conditions for everyone, and the benefits to both working and middle classes of instigating the board of health improvements.³⁷ Greenall went on to build a house on two plots on Newton Road, but presumably aligned himself with those 'poorer owners', and was almost certainly not moving in the same social circles as the owner of four shares. The decision taken to remove back streets from the layout suggests diverging visions for the future estate. For those thinking of a villa surrounded by a garden covering one or more plots, the question of a back street must have seemed irrelevant, as side access to the rear could be provided directly from the street. Those who envisaged rows of terraced houses with more than one dwelling on a plot might have felt rear access was important for the sanitary reasons mentioned. Most of the terraced houses eventually built on the estate had through-passages to their gardens between each pair, although three on Bank Place have rear access from Garden Walk.

³⁵ *PG*, 21 January 1860.

³⁶ N Morgan, *Deadly Dwellings: Housing and Health in a Lancashire Cotton Town: Preston from 1840 to 1914* (Mullion Books, 1993).

³⁷ *PG*, 21 January, 4 February 1860.

There was a further proposal to create a crescent in the middle of the estate, to bring 'the centre allotments more on an equality with the western sites'.³⁸ This design might have been to compensate for the more limited views and proximity of the railway and the mill. However, a rectangular layout with narrow frontages enabled more houses on a street than the 'sinuous curves of arcadia'.³⁹ Perhaps for similar economic reasons, this suggestion also was not implemented. The final layout was reported as approved in February 1860.⁴⁰ The same report said that a ballot for plots would take place on 15 March – a brief account of that meeting said that the allocation proceedings were 'very satisfactory'.⁴¹ There is no indication that the plots were oversubscribed, as had been the case for Fulwood Freehold.⁴² The Ashton Rules stated that shares would be allocated by seniority of membership, which was one of the options typically used by building societies, especially the earlier building clubs where money was released for house building in phases as investment funds grew.⁴³ From the limited evidence of the newspapers, it seems probable that the Ashton society sold only as many shares as it had plots to allocate, and whether by drawing lots or working down the list of members, there seem to have been no questions raised about the process. Even before the ballot, members were attempting to sell shares in the society, with three separate advertisements in one newspaper. At the same time, tenders were being advertised for materials and contractors to create the infrastructure of level plots, roads, and drains.⁴⁴

By late April 1860, building work had started. The *Preston Chronicle* reported that excavations had begun on plots owned by Samuel Wilson of Cannon Street.⁴⁵ The work was for a group of four small houses on the corner of Wellington Road and Bank Place,

³⁸ *PC*, 11 February 1860.

³⁹ AM Edwards, *The Design of Suburbia: a Critical Study in Environmental History* (Pembridge, 1981) p25.

⁴⁰ *PC*, 25 February 1860.

⁴¹ *PC*, 17 March 1860.

⁴² *PC*, 24 January 1852.

⁴³ Price, *Building Societies* (1959) p103.

⁴⁴ *PC*, 11 and 25 February, 10 March 1860.

⁴⁵ *PC*, 28 April 1860. The brief mention places the excavations on Waterloo Road, where a pair of houses bears the date 1861. The evidence, including the 1861 census, is that Wilson built only Spring Bank, which were the first houses to be inhabited.



Fig 1.3 Spring Bank in 2020. Samuel Wilson's houses dated 1860, seen from Bank Place. Photographs from the 1970s show the brickwork unrendered.

which bear his initials, the name Spring Bank, and the earliest datestone on the estate of 1860 (Fig 1.3). Other freehold land societies inspired retrospective and somewhat romantic accounts of bands of owners hard at work on their plots.⁴⁶ At Ashton the evidence is more prosaic of the occasional sale of plots, the further advertising of tenders for materials and fencing, probably for the streets at the interior of the estate and, by mid-1861, references to houses to let. The second annual general meeting in October 1861 reported that nineteen houses had been erected, with others at the planning stage.⁴⁷ It is impossible to identify these with any certainty – apart from Samuel Wilson's four – but fieldwork and other evidence suggest that the majority of the earliest houses are smaller and terraced. These include the four built by Samuel Wilson, a further six on Bank Place, and six nearby at Garden Walk Terrace with a datestone of 1861. All are on the edge of the estate nearest Preston, and facing the pre-existing mill. There is another cluster of houses on Waterloo Road, backing onto the railway line and close to the bridge over it – three detached of various sizes and a

⁴⁶ Home, 'Peri-Urban Housing' (2010) p369; Gaskell, 'Yorkshire Estate Development' (1972) p158.

⁴⁷ PC, 5 October 1861.

semi-detached pair (Fig 1.4). Others are dotted around the estate – at least two more pairs on Waterloo Road, a pair on Beech Grove, a large house on three plots on Rose Terrace, and several on Victoria Parade, including a ‘genteel residence’ to let in July 1861.⁴⁸



Fig 1.4 Waterloo Road in the 1900s, showing the early cluster of houses with Guild Cottage on the far right next to Highfield Place. See Fig 4.2 for a current view.
Preston Digital Archive

Ashton Freehold was of course a ‘land society’, albeit advertised and constituted for the building of houses as well as the purchase of land, and it is clear from the details above that the vast majority of plots remained unbuilt. This co-existence of both land and buildings over decades is typical of many freehold land societies.⁴⁹ However, the early building pattern suggests that when Samuel Wilson began his excavations in the spring of 1860, the future development of the suburb was far from settled. The first annual general meeting in October 1860 seems to have been a pivotal moment, which echoes the transition within the freehold land society movement from the smaller, ‘amateur’ or ‘self-help’ societies to more professional and commercial ones. The

⁴⁸ PC, 24 July 1861.

⁴⁹ Gaskell, ‘Yorkshire Estate Development’ (1972) p161.

tension between these two approaches marks a key change in the way both the estate and the society were to evolve and is the subject of the next section.

A pivotal moment

By autumn 1860, the development of the Ashton Freehold estate appeared to be progressing satisfactorily, with plots allocated, contractors appointed and houses under construction. However, it seems that this disguised concerns about management, and a possible power struggle, which probably delayed the first annual general meeting – according to the society’s Rules, these were to be held annually in September. The reports of the meeting are surprisingly bland, given the auditors’ account of ‘the unsatisfactory and irregular manner in which the business of the year had been conducted’.⁵⁰ No more detail was provided, but there are at least three areas in which the original committee appears not to have operated according to the existing legislation, thereby displaying the inexperience and ignorance that concerned contemporary writers.⁵¹

The first dated back to the formation of the society. The events laid out earlier in this chapter apparently proceeded according to the regulations, but there was plainly some confusion. The notice for the ‘First Public Meeting’ stated that ‘This society has been established under the provisions of the Friendly Societies Acts, the Officers appointed, and the Rules duly approved.’⁵² However, it was the Building Society Act of 1836 that governed the activities of the freehold land societies – albeit confusingly intertwined with the legislation for friendly societies. It is possible that the emergence of the Ribbleton society alerted the Ashton promoters to some of the procedural requirements. The printed Rules, approved and signed by the registrar on 15 September 1859, state that they were agreed at a meeting of the society members a fortnight earlier on 1 September. This date was before the first public meeting, billed

⁵⁰ PC, 13 October 1860.

⁵¹ Beggs, ‘Freehold Land Societies’ (1853) p342; Gaudie, *Cruel Habitations* (1974) p213.

⁵² PC, 10 September 1859.

as taking place on 8 September, although the notice for it appeared in a newspaper published on 10 September. It seems probable that the society rushed to establish themselves formally, and the advertisement was to fulfil their legal obligations. Three typographical errors on the first page of the Rules suggest they were produced in haste.

The second irregularity relates to buying the land. Although the purchase of the initial twenty-five acres was said to have been concluded before the first public meeting, this seems unlikely. The unwanted land around the mill only went back on sale in mid-October 1859, and a conveyance of 1862 cites indentures dating the purchases of land to June and July 1860.⁵³ It is a minor point and the auditors' accusations more probably related to the possible illegal ownership by the society. The Building Society Act of 1836 was notoriously opaque, leading to decades of legal action seeking clarification as well as inconsistent ruling by the registrar. Societies were not allowed to own property and any transactions had to be carried out through the trustees.⁵⁴ The indentures mentioned above conveyed the two pieces of land to John Howarth, the secretary, and James Chetwin, the president. As officers of the society, they were not supposed to act for it in this way and any property could only legally be held by trustees. By the date of the 1862 conveyance the three trustees are acting as the vendors.

A third concern may have related to borrowing. A clause in the 1838 model rules had permitted building societies to borrow money, but within a few years the registrar was rejecting any rules allowing this. Only in 1869 did a test case decide borrowing by building societies was legal.⁵⁵ The Ashton society's Rules therefore have no reference to borrowing, but the accounts reported at the meeting included loans of over £11,600. By the following year, this had increased by almost £1,000, and was owed to 'bankers and others'. On this matter at least, there must have been tacit agreement to ignore it.

⁵³ Deeds to The Firs, 11 Rose Terrace, 1862.

⁵⁴ Cleary, *Building Society Movement* (1965) pp50; Gaudie, *Cruel Habitations* (1974) p212.

⁵⁵ Cleary, *Building Society Movement* (1965) pp34-8.

In spite of the auditors' concerns, their explanations of the society's accounts were sufficient to gain unanimous approval at the October 1860 meeting, which concluded with the appointment of trustees and election of the committee. Only four of the original ten continued to serve, which contributes to a sense of turmoil in the society. The most significant appointment, however, was that of a new secretary, JH Longworth. He became a successful estate agent, living on Fulwood Freehold, but at this time was a commission and insurance agent in his mid-twenties. The impression is of an ambitious young man, who saw a commercial and professional opportunity for himself in taking the influential, paid role with Ashton Freehold. As early as March 1860 he was advertising his services to sell and buy plots on the estate. He was also the secretary for the Borough Benefit Building Society, mentioned above, which was promoting the business potential offered in Ashton. These roles must have given him valuable insights and from this point he seems to have focused his business on property. In 1862 he went into partnership with William Gardner, a young architect and surveyor, who became an owner and occupier of houses on Ashton Freehold. Longworth on the other hand seems not to have invested his own money in the estate, but continued to take roles with other building societies and the Ribbleton Freehold Land Society.

It seems reasonable to assume that it was Longworth who introduced new procedures for the approval of building plans against a set of conditions attached to conveyances of Ashton Freehold property.⁵⁶ These did not however go unchallenged. In March 1861, there is a report of three sets of plans submitted for consideration by the committee, one of which was rejected for non-compliance with the minimum elevation. The rebuff seems to have prompted a special general meeting the following month, which agreed to reduce the minimum elevation by two feet, and, although this is less clear, a new restriction to two storeys, plus attic and cellar.⁵⁷ It is impossible to know if this reflected a wish to reduce the cost of building or simply to establish a general style, but it is perhaps evidence of the realistic aspirations of many members.

⁵⁶ Deeds to The Firs, 1862 and others.

⁵⁷ *PH*, 9 March, 13 April 1861.

The eight conditions did however establish the estate as one of villa houses worth a minimum of £120 and with only one dwelling per plot – thereby outlawing the early terraced houses occupying half a plot. The detailed conditions also set out a building line of 15 feet from the road, with frontages to be enclosed by a low brick and stone wall and privet or hawthorn hedge of no more than five feet. Without these conditions, typical of many Victorian developments, the Ashton society might have suffered the consequences of failing to control building at an early stage. A Leicester freehold land society petitioned the local board in 1853 to stop a builder of densely packed ‘hovels’. In Birmingham, there were similar problems of ‘irregular and reckless’ development, leading to the imposition of conditions.⁵⁸

The experience of local brickworking probably inspired a ban on owners using the clay on their plot to make bricks. On the Eastbourne estate in Darlington, bricks could be made on-site to build a house, but not commercially.⁵⁹ Like Eastbourne, Ashton Freehold allowed trades that did not create ‘more smoke or noise than a Dwellinghouse or any disagreeable smell’, forbidding those ‘noisome inconvenient or detrimental to the neighbourhood’.⁶⁰ The sale of alcohol was forbidden, in line with the Ashton society’s temperance hotel origins, but probably also to maintain the estate’s tone. There was no reference to how the Ashton land could be used – in Eastbourne this was specifically limited to gardens, agricultural produce or dwelling houses, although workshops at the rear were permitted. Overall, the conditions seem to assume that houses will be built on Ashton Freehold.

It is these conditions that led to the conclusion that the October 1860 meeting was a significant turning point in the development of the estate and, in consequence, its character. With the exception of four terraced houses added to Garden Walk Terrace in 1884, there were no more built until the 1960s. Those like Samuel Wilson who started building immediately were able to choose what they built and clearly their vision was of houses comparable to many in Preston at the time, albeit with gardens

⁵⁸ Smith, J, personal communication; Chapman and Bartlett, ‘Building Clubs’ (1971) p242.

⁵⁹ Smith, *Freeholders’ Home Estate* (2012) p7.

⁶⁰ Deeds to The Firs, 1862.

attached. Other members, especially perhaps those intending to build their own homes, evidently saw the future of the estate differently. In consequence, the estate as built was more open, varied in its architecture and greener than it might have been – the impact on its social character will be examined in the following chapters.

The appointment of Longworth seems to have provided the society with stability. The provision of a water supply by Preston Waterworks followed swiftly, with a somewhat slower supply of gas by Preston Gas Company. By 1871 there were 65 houses, and ten years later 143 houses. After the annual meeting in October 1861, there is no direct evidence of the society and its members until 1874, when once again a significant divide between the amateur and professional approaches arose.

The 'end' of the society

The registration of land societies as benefit building societies has obscured their origins, but even at the time the legislation created ambiguity, which could be exploited. This lack of clarity was at the core of 'A Clash at the Ashton Land Society' reported in January 1874.⁶¹ Longworth and former resident JJ Smith had given permission for St Andrew's church to link a drain to the Ashton Freehold sewers.⁶² These sewers were 'private property, made at heavy cost' and such was the concern that a group of residents called a special general meeting to appoint a committee to deal with this and the winding up of the society as soon as possible. Longworth refused to attend, saying that the meeting was illegal, that the building society had been wound up in 1872, and that the land society continued to administer building regulations in the hands of the 'legal owners of the estate'. By this he apparently meant himself, Smith, and the sole surviving trustee, who was probably Smith's brother. The discussion among the forty members at the meeting revealed confusion.

⁶¹ PC, 10 January, 17 January 1874. The meeting may also have been prompted by a new parliamentary Bill in late 1873, requiring building societies to be incorporated. In the Act passed in 1874, this was optional for existing societies.

⁶² LA, PR 3279/4/23 and 25 Letters between St Andrew's churchwardens and JH Longworth, secretary, Ashton Land Society, 1873.

The elected chairman – though apparently not a member – said that ‘in 1859 that society commenced, but afterwards the funds were applied to the Land Society. This might be illegal, yet it was only what other societies did’. It appears that legally there was a single entity, as registered in 1859, but that the predominant use of the land society name had complicated the situation. In addition, because of the ban on building societies’ ownership of property, all conveyances were in the names of the trustees, and did not mention the society by either name. A letter from Longworth read out at the meeting claimed that the building society had been terminated in September 1872 as it had achieved all its objects, yet he also revealed that some plots had still not been conveyed, his reason why the land society could not be wound up. Although the society’s Rules had no clause on termination, the chairman seemed to believe it was a terminating society, saying that it had ‘run fourteen and a half years instead of nine and a half’. It was not unusual for terminating societies to take longer than expected to achieve their objectives, often because the initial term relied on faulty or over-optimistic financial calculations.⁶³ Indeed, according to the chairman, the Ashton members were ‘£68 out of pocket each’. The limited evidence for Ashton and lack of other examples leave the legalities or otherwise of Longworth’s claims and the members’ actions unclear. It does however appear that the membership had a limited understanding, and had lost control, of the society. Equally, Longworth, allied with JJ Smith, had contrived to take over management of the society’s affairs without further accountability. There had been no formal winding up under either name, and no accounts produced since 1871 – although nor had Longworth claimed a fee since 1872.

The formal existence of the Ashton Freehold Land Society was only visible for fifteen years. No further references to its operation have been found following the meeting in 1874. The residents appear to have taken responsibility, often through the township ratepayers’ meetings, where they were prominent. However, they also formed a committee to tackle the state of Waterloo Road, the records of which show the challenges. The minutes cover over a year of meetings beginning in May 1878, and a

⁶³ Cleary, *Building Society Movement* (1965) pp57-8. The Ribbleton freehold land society agreed to wind up in February 1873 after thirteen and a half years: *PC*, 2 November 1872.

draft letter shows they were hoping to persuade the township ratepayers to adopt the road. John Hayhurst was a prime mover, but as a tenant was dependent on the landowners to fund the work.⁶⁴ It was probably with some relief that, in 1880, 'urban Ashton' became part of Preston borough, and its roads, sewers and services were formally adopted. Certainly, unlike Fulwood, there seems to have been no resistance to the move.

In 1895, correspondence from the Registrar of Friendly Societies addressed to 'Temperance Hotel, Fishergate' was returned marked 'Not to be Found'. Nonetheless, as late as 1909, there was an advertisement for a house on Ashton Freehold, suggesting the society's estate remained distinctive.⁶⁵ Finally, in the mid-1930s, 'Ashton Benefit Building Society, otherwise known as the Ashton Freehold Land Society' was wound up.⁶⁶ The trusteeship of the surviving funds had devolved in 1910 to John Booth and John Gardner, the latter probably the son of Longworth's business partner and a long-term Freehold resident and owner. They had increased the £300 in the account to £650 by investing in War Loans, but had been told they had no authority to disburse the money. Longworth had died in 1913, and any paperwork relating to the society had been pulped due to wartime paper shortages. At a first hearing in December 1933, the society was once again described as illegal, but by March 1934 its dual identity had been recognised. A year later, the court decided that the funds should go to the Crown, at last terminating the society. Histories of other societies focus on their initiation, so how typical the end of Ashton Freehold was is uncertain. It does however reinforce the confused and obscure nature of the freehold land society movement from its origins nearly a century before.

⁶⁴ LA, DDX 595/5 Plans and letter concerning the surfacing of Waterloo Road, Ashton, 1878.

⁶⁵ *Lancashire Evening Post* (hereafter *LEP*), 15 March 1909.

⁶⁶ *LEP*, 20 December 1933; 23 January 1934; 29 March 1934; 26 February 1935. *The London Gazette*, 3 April 1934.

Conclusion

It is hard not to see echoes of Beggs' comment reflected in the history of Ashton Freehold Land Society:

'I am sorry to say that, from the inexperience of the members, and the designs, very often, of persons at the head of the management, they do anything but contribute to the interests of the class whose patronage they seek. Many of them put forth promises it is impossible they can fulfil; some of them are promoted by speculating solicitors and house and land agents, who, having properties to sell, obtain by this means much more than the actual value, and not a few have suffered from the wilfulness of an ignorant direction, and from the jobbing of the officials.'⁶⁷

He was probably talking about societies aimed at a working-class membership, and Ashton's was far more mixed as the following chapters will discuss. However, the character of the society certainly changed after Longworth's appointment in 1860. The early committee appeared to lack the necessary experience and knowledge to manage the wide-ranging responsibilities of the society. It is likely they and the wider membership were happy to delegate these to Longworth as secretary. He however was not a disinterested party and was certainly encouraging the 'jobbing' or trading in shares and plots at an early stage.

A further consequence of Longworth's intervention was to change the built development of the estate. Many freehold land society estates, such as those in Walkley in Sheffield, or in Ipswich, were primarily of terraced houses, albeit with some gradations in size and therefore social mix.⁶⁸ The Ashton estate might well have continued to develop in a similar fashion, at least in parts, but for the pivotal meeting after its first year. It seems reasonable to assume that as a result its social character evolved to reflect these architectural differences.

⁶⁷ Beggs, 'Freehold Land Societies' (1853) p342.

⁶⁸ Gaskell, 'Yorkshire Estate Development' (1972); Howlett, *Ipswich Building Society* (1999).

Ashton Freehold appears to embody aspects of the freehold land society movement, in particular the change from societies with self-help and social motives to those primarily concerned with commercial development, as well as the uneasy and obscure relationship with the history of building societies. These can be seen in the move from more diverse architecture to an estate dominated by villas, and in the society's long drawn-out termination. The next two chapters will examine the socio-economic status of its residents against these developments, and how the establishment of Ashton Freehold was a significant transitional element in residents' and owners' lives.

Chapter 2

Ashton Freehold – a ‘genteel’ place?

Introduction

‘During recent years, the population of Ashton has increased considerably, and it is “going on.” In the centre of its most elevated part, many genteel residences, occupied by Preston tradesmen, and others in good circumstances, have been erected ; whilst on its southern side, entire streets of cottages have, during the past ten years, been built. Along its western border there are several select mansions.’¹

This quotation from local journalist and historian, Anthony Hewitson, provides an unusually nuanced contribution to the perception of Ashton as a middle-class suburb, which continues to this day. He was writing in 1872, a decade after Ashton Freehold was established, and he differentiated three areas. The mansions are the country houses such as Ashton Park, the Larches, and Whinfield occupied by ‘Grand’ people, ‘who lived out of town, and came in by carriage’.² The cottages are the workers’ terraced houses extending up the hill from Preston. The ‘most elevated part’ is the location of Ashton Freehold.

Although Hewitson was known for his sometimes teasing or mocking style, his use of ‘genteel’ is also reflected in advertisements for houses on Ashton Freehold in the 1860s. He is probably therefore reflecting the aspirations for the estate. As discussed in the previous chapter, an apparently pivotal moment in the freehold land society set it firmly on the course of ‘gentility’. The new standards for houses meant that fewer people could afford to build on their land, and placed Ashton Freehold financially out of reach for even more. Nonetheless, some of the houses were more akin to Hewitson’s workers’ cottages.

¹ A Hewitson, *Our Country Churches and Chapels: Antiquarian, Historical, Ecclesiastical, and Critical Sketches by “Atticus”* (Preston, 1872) p37.

² N Morgan, *Desirable Dwellings: Middle Class Housing in Preston in the First Half of the 19th Century* (The author, 1995). Ashton Park was the former home of the Pedder family, the Larches was built by banker John Lawe, and Whinfield was the home of Edmund Harris, lawyer and benefactor of several Preston institutions.

If genteel is a somewhat nebulous word in the mid-Victorian period, implying both actual refinement and pretensions to higher status, this is closely matched by attempts to define its associated term, 'middle-class'. One of the key discussions about the freehold land society movement is the perceived dichotomy of working-class 'self-help' and middle-class 'commercialism'.³ As Chase said, the movement was never exclusively one or the other.⁴ This diversity can be seen in the wide differences between estates built by societies, such the workers' terraced housing in Walkley, Sheffield, and the large garden plots with villas in Fulwood, Preston.⁵ It is also visible in the individuals involved, with societies often led by the professional or social leaders of a community for – as they saw it – the benefit of the workers.⁶ Indeed, the rebuke of the Chartist leader, Bronterre O'Brien, that 'Every man who joins these land societies is practically enlisting himself on the side of the Government against his own order', associated the land society movement with social transition.⁷ In other words, to become a property owner was to remove oneself from the working classes.

Ashton Freehold's distinctive origins as a freehold land society not only made their mark topographically, but also socially. The diversity of the society membership seen previously already suggests that Ashton Freehold cannot readily be defined, especially in its first quarter-century, except perhaps as a place of social transition. This chapter will discuss the socio-economic status of not only the estate's residents but also the owners and investors, relating this to the development of the estate. The primary sources for the residents are the 1871 and 1881 censuses. The evidence of sewer maps from 1880 and an 1885 valuation book provides information about owners as well. Finally, wider sources allow some insights into the individual finances of residents and investors, and the economic conditions of the time. These considerations will set the scene for the following complementary chapter discussing the possible motivations for

³ As noted in the introduction, working- and middle-class are used here as shorthand to convey perceived differences of status.

⁴ Chase, 'Out of Radicalism' (1991) p341.

⁵ Gaskell, 'Yorkshire Estate Development' (1972); Boxall, *Suburbanisation* (1997).

⁶ Smith, *Freeholders' Home Estate* (2012) p7.

⁷ Quoted in Home, 'Peri-Urban Housing' (2010) p367.

membership of the Ashton society and the personal choices made to build, live or invest there over one or more generations.

Ashton Freehold in 1871

By 1871, the year before Hewitson's description, there were 65 occupied houses on Ashton Freehold – and another four unoccupied and four under construction. The seventeen terraced houses on Bank Place and Garden Walk (Fig 2.1), bordering the 'buffer area' round the mill, made up about a quarter of the houses. As well as the early cluster of five, more houses were dotted along Waterloo Road, many of them semi-detached though of differing sizes. Most roads had at least one occupied house, with greater numbers on the streets nearest Preston – Garden Walk and Victoria Parade – and at the edges of the estate on Tulketh Road and Waterloo Road.



Fig 2.1 Garden Walk around 1900 showing Garden Walk Terrace on the left, with the later bay-fronted Ruby Terrace houses beyond.

Preston Digital Archive

This piecemeal development of freehold land society estates is typical.⁸ The houses range greatly in size overall. Several were small, detached houses, each occupying a single plot but similar to a terraced house in style and dimensions.⁹ At the other end of the scale were double-fronted houses with four or five bedrooms set within three plots. None however was as large as those typical of Winckley Square or Fulwood Freehold, where Preston's prominent professionals and businessmen lived.¹⁰

So, who was living in these houses? The households recorded in 1871 echo the diversity of their homes, although it is a partial picture, capturing the inhabitants on a single date. It tells us nothing about the owners of rented property, nor those whose land had not been built on. A decade on, it is difficult to be sure who was a founder member of the freehold land society and who a later investor – at least ten early residents or landowners had died by then. Another difficulty is the vagueness of some addresses. The first plans of the estate date from around 1880, so the houses built by 1871 have been identified from their architecture and any documentary sources – some remain uncertain. With these caveats, the 1871 census tells us a good deal about those who had chosen to live on Ashton Freehold while it was still a new and only partially developed estate.¹¹

Hewitson described the residents of Ashton Freehold as 'Preston tradesmen, and others in good circumstances'. He was clearly categorising them as financially secure, but whether he considered them middle-class is unclear. The mid-Victorian definition of middle-class was evolving, dependent in part on location and context, and as much about cultural and spatial differentiation as socio-economic factors.¹² The development of the Ashton Freehold estate outside Preston associated it with a

⁸ Gaskell, 'Yorkshire Estate Development' (1972) p160.

⁹ Guild Cottage, in the Waterloo Road cluster, was originally about 850 square feet in total, only a little larger than Chapman and Bartlett's smaller working-class housing: 'Building Clubs' (1971) p232.

¹⁰ G Timmins, *The Built Environment Transformed: Textile Lancashire during the Industrial Revolution* (Historic England, 2021); Knight and Burscough, *Historic Fulwood* (1998).

¹¹ In the 1861 census, only Samuel Wilson's group of four houses was occupied.

¹² S Gunn, 'Class, Identity and the Urban: the Middle Class in England, c1790–1950', *Urban History*, 31:1 (2004) pp29-47.

growing middle-class.¹³ Whether the early residents were middle-class or not is addressed in this and the next two sections.

The analysis of class is usually by socio-economic status, a process beset with methodological challenges and much argued over. The difficulties of definitions, terminology and personal perceptions of status are compounded when applied historically. Contradictions abound – Burnett included the ‘tradesmen, shopkeepers and book-keepers’ typical of Ashton Freehold in the bottom tier of the middle class, then on the opposite page sets a minimum income of £150, which was the salary earned by the accountants resident in large houses on the estate.¹⁴ This section will therefore resort to several different perspectives to shed light on the 328 people living on Ashton Freehold in 1871.

Armstrong’s methodology identified five categories based on census occupation.¹⁵ Applied to Ashton Freehold in the 1871 census the following breakdown emerges (Table 2.1):¹⁶

Table 2.1 Socio-economic status on Ashton Freehold in 1871 – Armstrong

Group 1 – eg large manufacturers, accountants	8	12%
Group 2 – eg schoolmasters, merchants, bookkeeper with servant	28	41%
Group 3 – eg carpenters, clerks, farmers	19	28%
Group 4 – eg gardeners, agricultural labourer	4	6%
Group 5 – unskilled workers	0	
Group 0 – annuitants, housekeepers ¹⁷	9	13%

¹³ J Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1985* (Methuen, 1986) p104.

¹⁴ Burnett, *Social History of Housing* (1986) pp98-9.

¹⁵ Armstrong, ‘Interpretation of the Census’, (1968) pp67-85. Armstrong had only the 1851 and 1861 censuses to draw on, and, for want of a better alternative, used the 1951 census occupations as the basis for his analysis. This approach has been regularly challenged, but no alternative methodology has been generally accepted.

¹⁶ The analysis includes three lodgers in the dataset of 68 householders.

¹⁷ It is unclear how Armstrong categorises annuitants and female heads classed as housekeepers, so these are coded as 0. As all but two are female, this category is discussed in the following chapter as part of women’s experiences on Ashton Freehold.

Interpreting the data at either end of the social spectrum is relatively straightforward. None of the residents were 'unskilled workers' under Armstrong's analysis. The gardeners and agricultural labourer in Group 4 – and the farmers in Group 3 – reflect the fact that Ashton Freehold still had many unbuilt plots cultivated as market gardens. Ashton itself was largely farmland, with several farms nearby on Long Lane. The gardeners all lived in the terraced houses on Bank Place and Garden Walk. The agricultural labourer was elsewhere on Garden Walk. It is possible that his family was living in a small building on a 'garden' plot shown on a map dated 1881 – perhaps he was associated with the larger house nearby, or somehow subverting the estate regulations on dwellings.¹⁸

At the other end of the scale, the eight households in Group 1 fall into three categories. One of two accountants and an auditor; another of two ironfounders and two cotton millowners; and lastly a curate lodging with a Group 3 household headed by a stonemason. The accountants, ironfounders and a millowner were living on or close to Tulketh Road, at the edge of the estate nearest the river and, apart from the latter, all appear to own – and probably to have built – their variously large houses.¹⁹

The remaining two categories make up 69% of the estate, split into twenty-eight households allocated to Group 2 and nineteen to Group 3. The boundary between them is, however, far from clear-cut and open to reinterpretation. It is also where the slippery continuum between middle class and working class dwells.²⁰ Crossick placed two groups in the lower middle class – shopkeepers and small businessmen on the one hand, and the newer 'white collar salaried occupations' on the other. His sources were primarily from the late 1800s however. He contrasts that period with a greater mid-Victorian sense of community, which was 'destroyed' by the gradual differentiation of socio-economic groups by area of residence.²¹

¹⁸ LA, CBP ACC9650/Roll/102 Sewer plan, 1881.

¹⁹ Sellers, the millowner, was renting, but later built Oundle Villas on Newton Road.

²⁰ D and J Mills, 'Occupation and Social Stratification Revisited: The Census Enumerators' Books of Victorian Britain', *Urban History Yearbook* 16 (1989) pp63-77.

²¹ GJ Crossick, 'The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain, a Discussion', in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain, 1870-1914*, GJ Crossick (ed), (Routledge, 1977) pp12-13, 48.

Many of Ashton Freehold's Group 2 households fall into Crossick's 'lower middle class' categories, as well as Hewitson's 'Preston tradesmen'. Seven were shopkeepers, including the two Smith brothers who ran a longstanding hat business on Preston's marketplace. Another three were small businessmen. Ten were in 'white-collar', non-manual occupations – bookkeepers or clerks, mill managers and commercial travellers and agents. There were also two 'master' tradesmen, two schoolmasters, a retired publican and a police sergeant. Finally, two occupations relate to the nearby river Ribble – the harbour master and a yacht master. Seven of these households were elevated from Group 3 by dint of having a servant.

Armstrong's skilled workers in Group 3 have been divided into non-manual and manual work by later historians.²² On Ashton Freehold in 1871 there were just two non-manual households in this category. Of the remaining seventeen, five were joiners or carpenters, one a stone mason, four worked in cotton mills, and a further four were – or had been – farmers. These particular occupations arguably reflect Ashton Freehold's situation – under construction, adjacent to a cotton mill, and in a rural area.

Over half the households might therefore be deemed clearly middle-class under Armstrong's analysis, but a large proportion was not. Subsequently, many historians have focused on 'servant keeping' as the 'badge of middle-class status'.²³ Royle was one of these, and applying his system to the same data merely moves similar proportions down a 'class' (Table 2.2):²⁴

²² SA Royle, 'Social Stratification from Early Census Returns: a New Approach', *Area*, 9:3 (1977) pp215-19; Boxall, *Suburbanisation* (1997) p68.

²³ J Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (Yale University Press, 1999) p19, although he states that this was less the case in northern industrial towns.

²⁴ Royle, 'Social Stratification' (1977) p216-7. His methodology, based on the available 1851 census, relies on the ratio of servants to household members. The tile manufacturer is in Class II due to his small household. The other manufacturers are all in Class III. As will be discussed in the final chapter, his focus on servant ratios differentiates Ashton from other 'middle-class' areas of Preston.

Table 2.2 Socio-economic status on Ashton Freehold in 1871 – Royle

Class I	Nil – the only large employer had insufficient servants	0	
Class II	eg accountants, teachers, tile manufacturer	7	10%
Class III	eg any with servants, non-manual	28	41%
Class IV	eg skilled manual without servants	22	32%
Class V	eg gardeners, agricultural labourer	4	6%
Class 0	eg annuitants, housekeepers with no servants	7	10%

In 1871, there were nineteen Ashton Freehold houses with servants. Another two households included nieces recorded as servants under ‘Occupation’, which may be their role in those households, or in another on a daily basis.²⁵ Only one household had two servants, that of a wealthy young widow, Mrs Walmsley. In mid-century England, although up to 75% of middle-class households had at least one resident servant, this varied greatly depending on economic status, but also on the level of need.²⁶ On Ashton Freehold the figure was 30%. A household of eight headed by an accountant had no servant recorded, while a bank cashier’s family of four had a servant girl, perhaps to help with a young baby and two-year old. The growing number of middle-class households in this period meant that young wives might have little experience of housekeeping.²⁷ This was probably the case in the newly-wed Seward household, where the wife, Frances, was only 19 years old. She was the daughter of JJ Smith, whose family of fourteen on Waterloo Road also managed to find space for one servant.

A very different approach involving servants is Morgan’s focus on housing and architecture. He used ‘the Grand, the Stylish, the Comfortable, and the merely Respectable’ to categorise middle-class residents in the wealthier areas of Preston.²⁸ Most of Ashton Freehold’s residents fall – at best – in Morgan’s lowest ‘merely Respectable’ category, where ‘only about half the houses had any living-in domestic

²⁵ In view of this lack of certainty, the nieces have been excluded from the analysis of servants.

²⁶ L Davidoff and C Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (Routledge, 2002) p389.

²⁷ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes* (2002) p391-2.

²⁸ Morgan, *Desirable Dwellings* (1995).

servant, and those with two were exceptional'. Morgan identified a requirement for separate space for servants' accommodation and tasks, such as basements and rear extensions, which elevated households to at least 'Comfortable'. The application of architecture to perceived and experienced social status is important in the Ashton context where early residents in particular were making significant choices in building and living there. The houses on Ashton Freehold, particularly those built in the first two decades, are generally four-square and on two floors, and not obviously built to accommodate servants. The Smith house, a large semi-detached, fits this description, albeit with attached outbuildings. The exceptions, where the inhabitants might be deemed 'Comfortable', although with only one servant apiece, include the homes built by the successful ironfounders on Tulketh Road, which had additional functional space at the rear of the double-fronted houses.

It is suggested that middle-class households were on average larger, in part because they included servants.²⁹ On Ashton Freehold there was an average of slightly over five people per house – in 1851 the average in Preston was just under six.³⁰ Only one house had a single resident, an unmarried male farmer of 67 years. Nine houses had two occupants – the majority of these were in the smaller terraced houses, although so was the Bilsborough family of ten on Garden Walk Terrace. Another three houses had eleven or more residents on census night, but there is little correlation between household size and social status.

In industrial Lancashire at this time, with its rapidly expanding population and extensive opportunities for some to flourish personally and financially, attempts to pin down social class come with many caveats. Much research has focused on working-class histories, but Gunn argued that 'identity' – in political and cultural terms – was as important as the primarily economic classifications in defining the 'middle class'.³¹ Accountancy for example was only just establishing itself as a profession in England, so

²⁹ Burnett, *Social History of Housing* (1986) p102.

³⁰ M Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (Cambridge University Press, 1971) p43.

³¹ Gunn, 'Class, Identity and the Urban' (2004).

in practice Ashton Freehold's accountants' status might have depended more on their local government role – and perhaps their homes.³² In Slater's 1869 Directory, Coulthard the accountant was one of seven 1871 Ashton Freehold residents listed as 'Gentry', along with the ironfounders Gregson and Monk, widow Eliza Walmsley, millowner Sellers, and – perhaps confirming the importance of self-identity – the Smith brothers, hatters. Many of Ashton Freehold's original members were apparently preparing or ready for retirement, having built up a trade or small business over decades and thus the means to acquire property. Their status, demonstrated by their homes in 1871, did not necessarily reflect their earlier life stages.³³

The first notice for Ashton Freehold Land Society in 1859 certainly seemed to be addressing a middle-class market when claiming the 'attention of those who are desirous to have a residence in a very salubrious part of the outskirts of the town'. As well as the 'genteel' house on Victoria Parade in 1861, 'delightfully situated' described the Freehold estate in 1862, and 'valuable houses' summed up Ashton Freehold when described to the Boundary Commissioners in 1867.³⁴ All these would then – and still today – indicate important values for people perceiving themselves as or aspiring to middle-class status. Equally, like much writing on this and other societies, these first two are marketing material, and therefore need to be treated with caution.³⁵ There are few advertisements for the terraced houses on Ashton Freehold, and these tend to be basic, so it is difficult to know how those smaller houses were perceived.

The mapping of the social status of residents in 1871 to the streets on Ashton Freehold in Fig 2.2 gives a picture of a remarkably mixed area, echoing the findings for the early society members. The apparent diversity of the freehold land society's membership can be detected in the differences of social status and house size in each street – the

³² JR Edwards and SP Walker, 'Lifestyle, Status and Occupational Differentiation in Victorian Accountancy', *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 35:1 (2010) pp2-22.

³³ Barker, *Family and Business* (2017) p181.

³⁴ *PG*, 10 September 1859; *PC*, 24 July 1861; R Clarkson and J Dearden, *The Guild Guide and Hand Book of Preston* (Toulmin, 1862) p55; *PC*, 12 October 1867.

³⁵ L Balderstone, 'Semi-Detached Britain? Reviewing Suburban Engagement in Twentieth-Century Society', *Urban History*, 41:1 (2014) p145.

allocation of plots by ballot provided an element of chance as to who would become neighbours. The evidence of the 1871 census and the houses built to that date also suggests that Ashton Freehold represented a wide individuality of lifestyles and houses. However, the continuing sale of empty plots and their eventual development under the society's conditions meant that the balance tilted increasingly to larger houses. The following section will assess whether this had changed the social profile of Ashton Freehold residents by the 1880s.

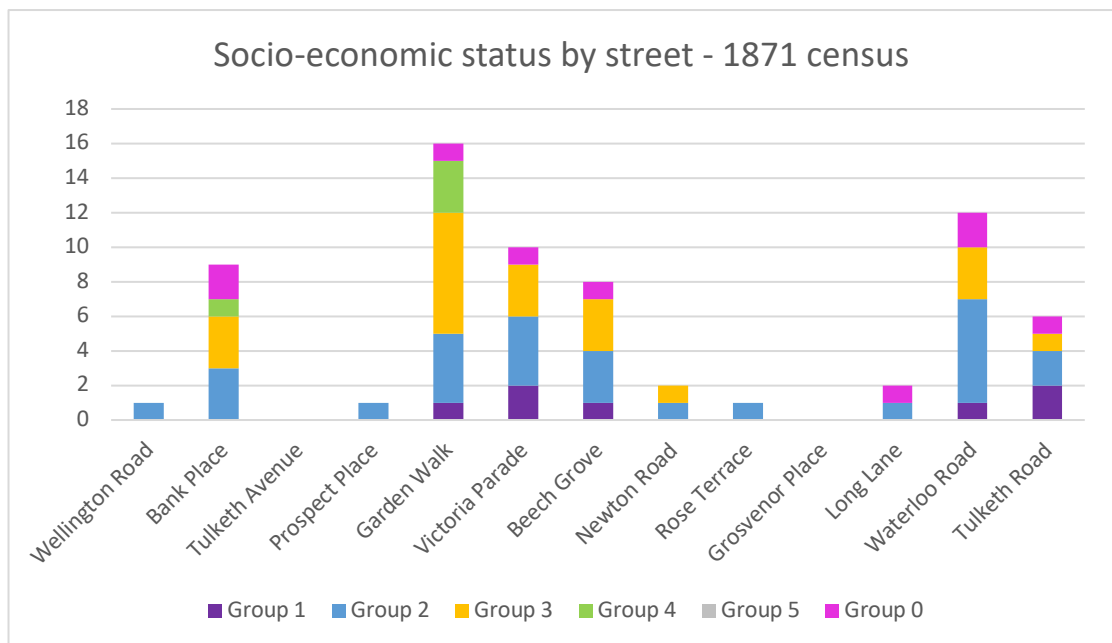


Fig 2.2 Analysis of the social status of Ashton Freehold residents by street, using Armstrong's methodology and the 1871 census.

Ashton Freehold in the 1880s

By the 1880s, Ashton Freehold was a suburb within Preston's boundaries. Although the land society had lost its earlier relevance, its management had created the conditions for an estate with middle-class aspirations. There were 143 houses on Ashton Freehold in 1881 – the majority were semi-detached, and the detached houses were mostly small or medium in size. However, the socio-economic profile seen in Fig 2.3 was little changed from ten years earlier.

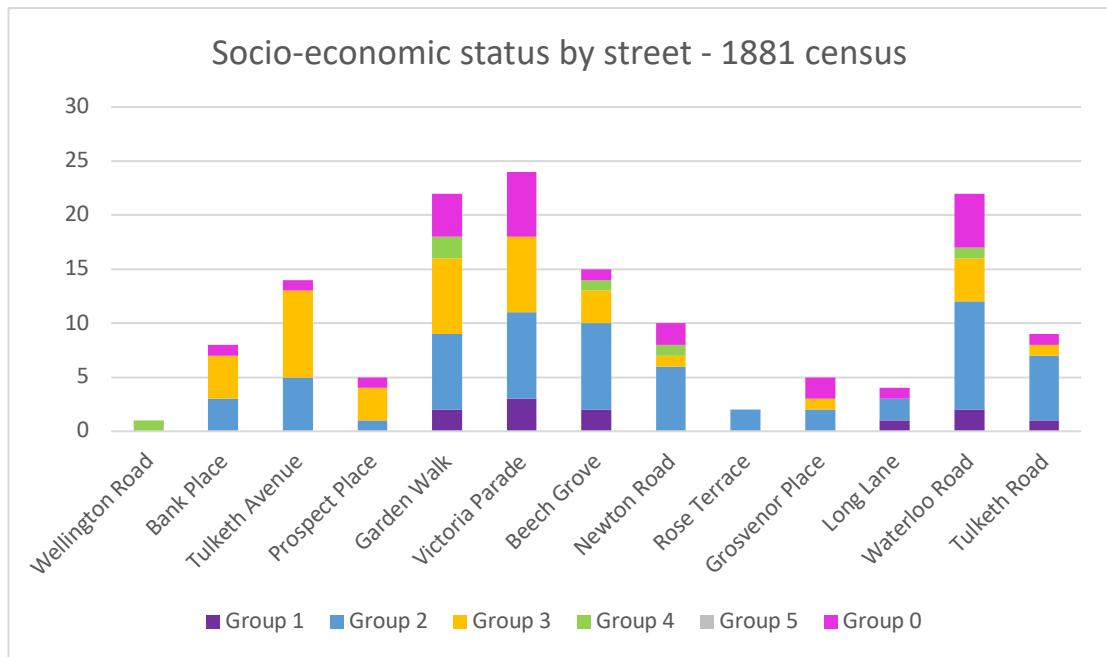


Fig 2.3 Analysis of the social status of Ashton Freehold residents by street, using Armstrong’s methodology and the 1881 census.

The two key differences were an increase in widows in Group 0, and a greater proportion of non-manual workers in Group 3 – the latter reflecting the increasing number of office jobs in the later Victorian period.³⁶ It might be expected that, as more houses were built to the minimum specifications, the proportion of higher-status residents would increase, but this does not appear to be the case. There are a number of possible reasons for this. One is the increase in retired tradesmen and shopkeepers, who had apparently chosen to move to Ashton in their later years. Another may be that the areas nearest Preston were being developed for both industry and workers’ housing. Although the mill closest to the estate had burnt down and closed in 1879, which residents might have welcomed, the site was being developed for terraced housing. The proximity to the expanding town may be why Ashton Freehold had failed to attract wealthy businessmen – it is notable that those in Group 1 are accountants, solicitors and clergy. The ironfounders and one cotton manufacturer had moved on, while another had died and his son was running a smaller business – Tulketh Road had changed in social profile as a result. By 1881, wealthy former residents were living in larger houses just outside Ashton Freehold on Long Lane, or in newly developed areas

³⁶ Crossick, ‘Lower Middle Class’ (1977) pp17-20.

off Garstang Road, or on Fulwood Freehold. A final reason may simply be that increased numbers of people were sharing in the wealth generated by industry and could afford to move out to perhaps the only area at the time offering the right balance of aspiration and affordability.

The 1880s is when comprehensive information about renters and owners on Ashton Freehold becomes available, in sewer maps from 1880 and a valuation book of 1885. The ratio of owner-occupiers to renters of houses was roughly even for the estate, but Fig 2.4 shows how this varied from street to street.

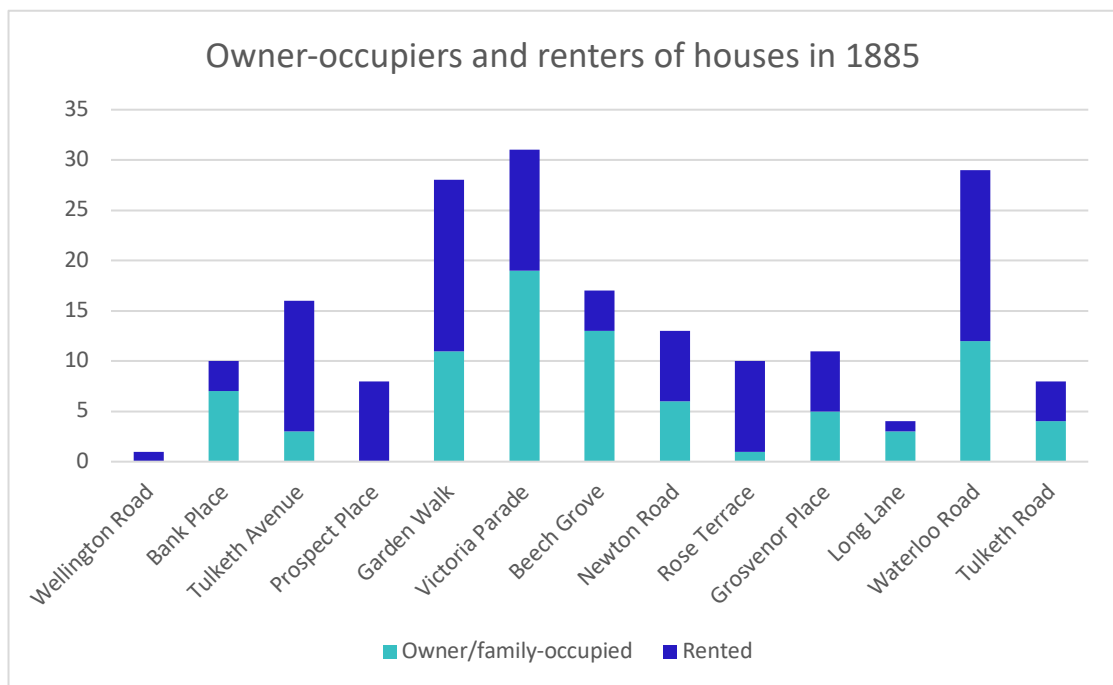


Fig 2.4 Owner-occupied and rented houses by street from the valuation list of 1885. The streets bounding the estate are at either end of the chart, and those in the middle are shown in the centre. Owner-occupation includes close family members.

The middle classes are said to have generally rented their homes, whereas the working class who could afford it bought their house for added security.³⁷ If this were so, the small, terraced houses would be expected to show a higher level of owner-occupation. On Bank Place, apart from Samuel Wilson's four rented houses, the remaining six were all owner-occupied, while on Garden Walk Terrace, four of the seven houses were

³⁷ FML Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society, A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830–1900* (Fontana, 1988) pp169-71.

occupied by their owners. However, Victoria Parade, Beech Grove and Newton Road, with a larger proportion of higher-status residents, also show a high proportion of owner-occupation. Notably, the streets that had been developed later – Tulketh Avenue and Rose Terrace for example – had a high number of renters, although their social profiles were quite different. In both cases, groups of houses were owned by non-resident individuals, suggesting that more speculative building took place on the remaining empty plots once the earlier committed membership had achieved their aims.

It was also not unusual for middle-class tenants to move frequently, perhaps as often as once a year.³⁸ On Ashton Freehold about half the residents in 1885 had been living in the same house in 1881, suggesting a high level of contentment whether renters or owners. Thirty households on the estate were owner-occupiers or resident in the same houses for twenty years or more from 1871, and often earlier. Others might move, but were clearly committed to Ashton Freehold, like Thomas Coulthard, who had lived in at least two houses on Ashton Freehold, before building his own detached house on Victoria Parade. However, he then rented his own house out and moved to a much larger rented semi-detached house on Tulketh Road. Many of these long-term residents may have been original members of the freehold land society, and so the apparently anomalous patterns of status and renting probably stem from the estate's origins. The essential aim of the early freehold land societies was to provide the opportunity to own land, and therefore the possibility of building on it. Whether these owners chose to live in their houses or exploit their land, or to rent either out, was irrelevant, but by joining the society they were generally making a long-term commitment.³⁹

Of the 133 owners of plots listed in the 1885 valuation book, 81 were living there and a further eleven had previously been resident. These figures indicate that 61% to 69% of the owners had an interest in the estate as a place to live, not just as an investment.

³⁸ Thompson, *Rise of Respectable Society* (1988) p171.

³⁹ Sixty years earlier, the 1793 Longridge Building Club rules specifically allowed members to build a house for their own occupation or to rent out: Price, *Building Societies* (1959) p34.

The ratio of owners to plots is 40%, so much lower than the 53% ratio of members to shares in Fulwood in 1851. It is however a very inexact comparison as the Ashton figure follows twenty years of economic challenges and successes, life changes and opportunities to buy and sell, and was almost certainly higher originally. The majority were owners of houses with gardens, although these varied greatly in size from the half plots listed as seven perches on Bank Place to the extensive grounds at Highfield on Tulketh Road of over two acres or 382 perches.⁴⁰ The latter was an anomaly – only around half of its land was on the estate. Only two other owners held more than 100 perches. John Moon had recently bought 208 perches of land and built eight houses on Rose Terrace and the adjoining streets, which he was renting out. William Smith, an early member and the longest serving trustee of the Ashton Freehold Land Society, owned 130 perches of both houses and undeveloped land, mostly on Waterloo Road and Long Lane where he was then living. Excluding the Highfield estate, the mean average holding per owner was just under 30 perches. The median was 26 perches, or two plots. More than a third owned one plot or less, indicating how diverse the ownership was on Ashton Freehold.

Further variety is seen in the gross estimated rental values for houses and gardens in 1885.⁴¹ These range from £9 on Garden Walk Terrace to £70 for Henry Davies' house on the corner of Beech Grove and Tulketh Road, with Highfield again an outlier at £170. Fig 2.5 shows the relationship between house values and social status on each street. It confirms that Tulketh Road and Long Lane (even excluding Highfield) were where both wealth and status resided. On Bank Place and Tulketh Avenue the lower house valuations correspond to the social status of the inhabitants there. Garden Walk is more diverse due to the Terrace – without those, the average rental is £18.

⁴⁰ The original house at Highfield appears to have been built on land outside the Ashton Freehold estate and the grounds only later extended onto at least four plots on the estate.

⁴¹ These rental values are higher than the rateable values used in studies of Nottingham and Surbiton to establish social status, which offer a similar methodology for further investigation. See N Hayes, "Calculating Class": Housing, Lifestyle and Status in the Provincial English City, 1900–1950', *Urban History*, 36:1 (2009) pp113-40.

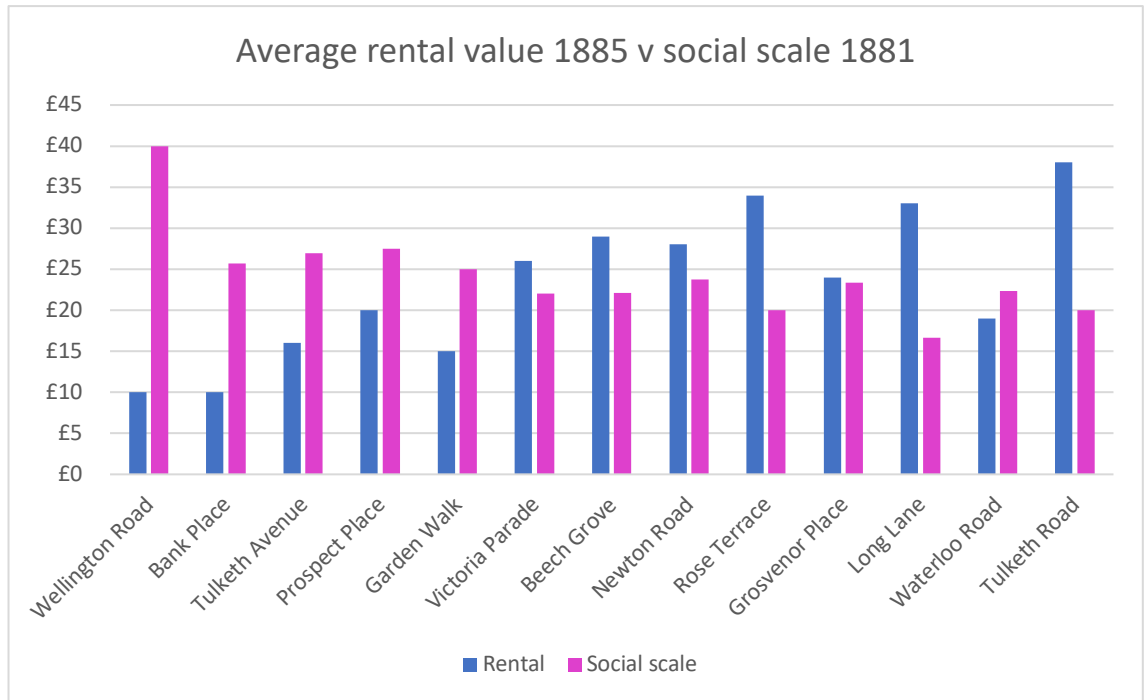


Fig 2.5 The average rental value by street in blue is set against the average score for social status (the lower the number the higher the status). Rose Terrace had two houses in 1881, and ten by 1885, so this comparison is inexact.



Fig 2.6 Victoria Parade in the 1920s. Sixty years after the creation of the estate, all plots are filled. The low walls and hedges required by the society are visible, but there is evidence on the right that some residents are disregarding the conditions.
Preston Digital Archive

The street at the heart of the estate, Victoria Parade, is shown in Fig 2.6 and perhaps best represents the aspirations of the estate. By the 1880s, there was a relatively high proportion of households in socio-economic Group 3 living on the street with an above average rental value of £26. A third of them were retired tradesmen and farmers born in Lancashire, while the youngest residents were mostly born further afield and in 'newer' occupations such as a banker's correspondent and an architect.

In the four years since the 1881 census, another forty houses had been built and by 1891 there were 218 houses. The 1880s saw the greatest increase in housebuilding and perhaps marks the point when Ashton Freehold, now part of Preston administratively, also became perceived as no longer so distinctive and less challenging now it was built up. However, as shown in Fig 2.7, about one-seventh of the estate was still classed as land only in 1885, each plot valued at ten shillings.

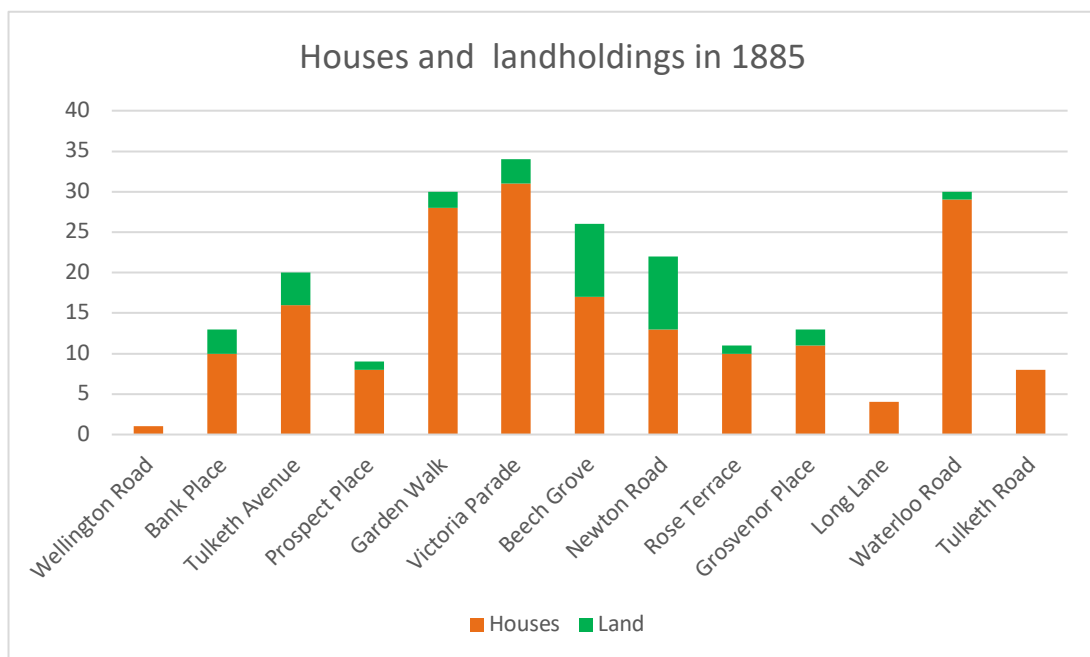


Fig 2.7 The distribution of houses and land shows a significant proportion of plots were still held as land in the valuation of 1885.

Some plots were probably being held for eventual building, such as William Pye's plot next to his house on Beech Grove, apparently used as a garden.⁴² The 1892 town plan

⁴² Preston Town Plan, Sheet LXI.9.2, surveyed 1891 (Ordnance Survey, 1892).

shows two areas with large greenhouses which were clearly market gardens. Thomas Bamford cultivated several plots between Tulketh Avenue and Bank Place, where he later had a shop, and also rented plots elsewhere on Ashton Freehold. The market garden on Newton Road is more obscure, but like Bamford's was still in that use well into the twentieth century. After more than a generation, Ashton Freehold estate still demonstrated its origins as a freehold land society, with its social mix and land in cultivation. The final section in this chapter returns to those origins to review how such a diverse group was able to afford to build, buy or rent a house there.

The cost of investing in Ashton Freehold

Ashton Freehold Land Society was set up to enable members to buy land at a more affordable price thanks to the scale of purchase. They could pay off the cost of £50 for a plot at two shillings a week over a decade – for a similar sum they could rent a small terraced house in Preston, so this was a significant commitment.⁴³ Many took at least ten years to pay for their share, but some paid up within a year or so.⁴⁴ Some bought a single plot of land for personal cultivation, others bought several to build houses for sale or letting – and there were many shades of activity between. In order to build, members needed to possess sufficient capital or take out a loan with one of Preston's many building societies or an individual investor – there is no evidence that the society ever offered additional loans against building costs.⁴⁵ The Borough Benefit Building Society was quick to seize the opportunity. The advertisements launching the building society in early 1860 drew attention to the likely business in loans from the freehold societies in Ashton and Ribblesdale – as well as the then flourishing economy.⁴⁶

The local economic context, however, was one of fluctuating fortunes. The Ashton society was launched into a booming cotton industry in 1860, which presumably

⁴³ See example of Poplar Street later in this section.

⁴⁴ Many of the deeds viewed show a first conveyance in the early 1870s, indicating a longer term may have been typical.

⁴⁵ Cleary, *Building Society Movement* (1965) p45. Preston had 10 building societies in 1853, behind only Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham and Sheffield.

⁴⁶ *PC*, 28 April 1860.

boosted the incomes of the cotton mill workers and owners, as well as those businesses and trades that served them.⁴⁷ However, within a year, the civil war between the northern and southern states of America had begun, leading to four years of mill closures and short-time working.⁴⁸ The greatest impact was on the cotton operatives, but it also affected shopkeepers, mill managers, and other business owners – typical society members. This early economic crisis probably contributed to the frequent advertisements of plots for sale on Ashton Freehold, although these appeared as early as February 1860.⁴⁹ This apparent turnover in ownership means it is impossible to know how the cotton crisis changed the overall profile of the membership. Certainly, in 1871, just twelve of the households were headed by someone directly employed in the textile industry, one of whom was an unemployed cotton mill manager, William Beck.⁵⁰

The occupations such as hatters, foremen, and tin plate worker, found in the 1871 census for Ashton Freehold, could have expected to earn a ‘medium’ income of at least 20 shillings a week in 1859.⁵¹ Many must have earned more, but Thomas Coulthard and Henry Davies are the only residents whose income is known. As successive accountants to the Board of Health in the early 1860s, they were paid £150 a year – the amount regarded as the entry point to the middle-class in the earlier nineteenth-century.⁵² Coulthard and Davies, both in their twenties when appointed, later became successful businessmen. It is probable that this secure income was among the highest on the estate and enabled them to build and flourish there.

Others had less certain finances, particularly in the early 1860s. Richard Seed was a hairdresser turned ‘general dealer’, with a shop on Friargate selling toys, hardware, and jewellery. He had three plots on Rose Terrace, which he advertised for sale ‘with

⁴⁷ D Chadwick, ‘On the Rate of Wages in Manchester and Salford, and the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire, 1839-59’, *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 23:1 (1860) pp1-36.

⁴⁸ D Hunt, *A History of Preston*, (Carnegie Publishing, 2009) pp237-9.

⁴⁹ *PC*, 11 February 1860.

⁵⁰ Another 13 residents were employed in some capacity in the cotton industry.

⁵¹ Chadwick, ‘Wages’ (1860); Anderson, *Family Structure* (1971) p26. Anderson described his wage categories as approximate, drawing on sources from 1834 to 1887, including Chadwick.

⁵² *PC*, 27 October 1860; *PH*, 5 March 1864; Burnett, *Social History of Housing* (1986) p99.

the excellent crop of potatoes now growing, and neatly fitted up cabin thereupon' in August 1860. It seems that there was no sale, as in July 1862 he paid off his shares and bought the plots outright from the society trustees. The £150 price of the plots was probably included in his mortgage taken out two days later with the Borough Benefit Building Society. Seed had four shares, entitling him to a loan of £480.⁵³ With this he built The Firs, a large detached five bedroom house in the centre of his three plots, seen in Fig 2.8, but in July 1864 it was up for sale by auction with a sitting tenant. However, again there was apparently no sale, suggesting that any bids failed to reach the minimum amount he would accept.⁵⁴ In each case when Seed sought to sell his Ashton assets, he probably had cashflow problems that were resolved in some other way, as the house remained in the family until the 1920s.



Fig 2.8 The Firs on Rose Terrace was built by Richard Seed in the early 1860s. Photograph undated.

Bruce Sandison, via Ancestry

⁵³ Price, *Building Societies* (1959) p102. The typical price for a building society share was £120.

⁵⁴ This is not untypical. Richard Singleton put his four-bedroom house on Victoria Parade up for auction in 1875. The auctioneer's notebook shows it attracted three bids up to £475 but was withdrawn. LA, DDJN Jabez Jones Auctioneer, uncatalogued.

William Pye was another early member, living on Waterloo Road in 1871. He was a master joiner employing three men and a boy – at least two were probably his sons. Like other joiners at the time, he had turned to building houses, operating on a similar scale to the majority of builders in London, constructing between one and six houses a year.⁵⁵ He clearly saw the opportunities on Ashton Freehold, both personally and professionally. He owned adjacent plots on Beech Grove, and was reported as building in Ashton in November 1861.⁵⁶ He moved into one of his Beech Grove houses, and continued to build, both in Preston and perhaps more speculatively on further houses in Ashton. However, this held risks and by November 1864, Pye was clearly heavily in debt – probably the combined impact of overstretching his financial resources and the depressed local housing market during the American civil war. A series of notices record the liquidation of his assets to pay off his debts. His workshop contents, stock and timber were auctioned, followed by four houses on Ashton Freehold, another in Preston, and a life insurance policy for £100. It was at least March 1868 before he had paid off his creditors.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, Pye was personally invested in Ashton Freehold, dying at Woodbine Cottage on Beech Grove in 1903.

Pye's story also demonstrates the importance of several wages sustaining a household income. In 1871, his four children aged over fourteen were all working in the timber and joinery trades. Ten years later, three younger children were working, though as a tailor and draper's and milliner's apprentices. Of the sixty-five houses on Ashton Freehold in 1871, twenty-seven included working family members other than the head. Only two wives were recorded with occupations other than housekeeper – one a milliner, the other a cotton weaver. Five of the widows had a working son or son-in-law, and eight households had members working in the family business or trade, providing business continuity. Both of these categories were primarily living in the larger houses. The remaining family workers lived in the terraced or smaller houses and were mostly employed in manual jobs – including seven daughters and a son-in-

⁵⁵ HJ Dyos, 'The Speculative Builders and Developers of Victorian London', in *Exploring the Urban Past: Essays in Urban history*, D Cannadine and D Reeder (eds), (Cambridge University Press, 1982) p164.

⁵⁶ *PH*, 9 November 1861.

⁵⁷ *PC*, 7 March 1868.

law in the cotton industry. Three sons were in clerk and sales jobs and a daughter worked as a pupil teacher.

Pye is also an example of a houseowner who was both an owner and the landlord of a second property.⁵⁸ The 1885 valuations show twenty-two resident owners were also renting out at least one house. Seven of these lived in one semi-detached house and rented out the adjoining one. In this way, the owner funded the building or purchase of a home while ensuring a regular income that might contribute to a mortgage. Advertisements for houses to let on Ashton Freehold rarely give the rent, but the going rate during the 1860s for a smaller semi or detached house was around £15.⁵⁹ By contrast, in 1871, terraced cottages – ‘clean and in good repair’ – on Poplar Street to the Ashton side of Preston, were available to let for 2s 10d a week, or about £7 7s annually.⁶⁰ In that year’s census, they were occupied primarily by millworkers and labourers, with wives and children often also working, demonstrating the significant step up in socio-economic status to live on Ashton Freehold.

Taking in boarders or lodgers was another way of increasing household income – there were nine boarders and three lodgers in 1871.⁶¹ Some family members were recorded as boarders, which suggests they were contributing to the family income either by working or from their own means. James and Mary Brocklebank had two unrelated boarders in 1871, a schoolmistress and a Methodist minister. The Brocklebanks had no children, and although in 1871 James was a manager in a mill, their financial position seems to have been sometimes precarious. James had worked his way up from cotton weaver in 1841 to become an overlooker, and in 1881 he was back in that role and unemployed. When he died five years later, he left just £40 personal estate. However, the income from boarders through much of their married life must have helped them

⁵⁸ Chase, ‘Out of Radicalism’ (1991) p344.

⁵⁹ *PH*, 17 October 1863 – detached house £15; *PC*, 7 July 1866 – semi-detached £16 10s; *PH*, 17 October 1866 – new semi-detached from £14. As comparison, in *PH*, 7 January 1871, a ‘Respectable’ terraced house on Spring Bank, off Fishergate Hill, with open view to the river– was to let for £15.

⁶⁰ *PH*, 7 January 1871. The OS survey of 1890-91 shows small, terraced houses with back yards on Poplar Street.

⁶¹ The census defined lodgers as occupying a sublet part of a house, but in practice the terms were inconsistently applied.

to buy a plot on the prime site of Tulketh Road and build a small, detached house there. It seems possible that they may also have raised funds by selling off small areas of their plot to neighbours.⁶²

It is clear that those able to live on Ashton Freehold were drawing, one way or another, on a higher income than most of Preston's population. Twenty years earlier, Anderson's analysis shows that 14% of households were earning over 20 shillings a week. To pay off, over ten years, a share in the land society and another for a mortgage to build a £120 house cost a minimum of about five shillings a week. The stories uncovered to date suggest that for some the financial commitment was not always easy, but that they were determined to maintain their presence on Ashton Freehold.

Conclusion

The Ashton Freehold estate, as might be expected from its varied architecture, was home to a socially mixed population. By the end of its first two decades, its residents were largely perceived or aspiring to the middle-class, though many were from the lower tiers of 'sub-classes stretching from bare sufficiency to extreme wealth'.⁶³ Although some roads tended to a higher or lower status, the process of allotting plots had created an unusual mix, so that the Brocklebanks' small 'detached-terrace' house was set among the far larger villas on Tulketh Road. On the other hand, probable straitened circumstances meant that a vicar's widow with a 15-year-old son still in education was living on Bank Place between multi-generational families with more than one member at work. This diversity was perhaps due to the proximity of the cotton mill and former brickmaking site compromising its rural location and perceived 'gentility'.

⁶² Preston Town Plan, Sheet LXI.9.7, surveyed 1891 (Ordnance Survey, 1892).

⁶³ Burnett, *Social History of Housing* (1986) p189.

However, the lack of sources for the membership in the early years leave uncertainty about whether Ashton Freehold was originally still more diverse. Wider family histories, not explored in detail here, suggest that many residents' parents were of lower social status than their offspring, who had pursued new 'white collar' careers or made a success of their trade in the expanding industrial society of the early Victorian period. The differences in housing and social status possibly conceal a greater similarity in origins among residents than is apparent.

The descriptions and marketing of Ashton Freehold make clear that the estate was aspiring to and perceived as of 'genteel' status. Occupational classification is probably less important than residents' aspirations and others' perceptions of them. The terminology of working and middle class is not particularly helpful in this context, as analysis of the Ashton residents places many in the space where the two elide at this time. As Crossick noted, social distinctions by place of residence were less fixed in the mid-Victorian period.⁶⁴ It is possible that in 1860 when members chose to buy shares in the freehold land society, the picture was weighted more to the working 'aristocracy'. Ten years later, those who had successfully come through the economic difficulties of the decade were moving up the social scale, in part thanks to their homes or landholdings on Ashton Freehold. Another decade on, the social mix was not significantly different and so, if broadly middle-class by that stage, it was still predominantly home to those for whom that status was aspirational rather than a given.

The final chapter will set this analysis against a more clearly middle-class estate. Meanwhile, the next chapter will examine some of the social and other networks that may have been important in establishing Ashton Freehold's character, and posit reasons why people chose to take the not insignificant step of investing in and moving to this new estate.

⁶⁴ Crossick, 'Lower Middle Class' (1977) p49.

Chapter 3

New lives in Ashton

Introduction

‘To remove to a suburb was not merely to change one’s address but, according to locality, to place oneself on a particular range of the social scale’.¹

The previous chapter analysed who was living on Ashton Freehold in its first two decades, in particular their social status and how their economic position enabled them to do so. This chapter will discuss the factors that may have brought them to Ashton Freehold, whether short-term or long-term. The concept of push and pull factors creating middle-class suburbs around nineteenth-century industrial towns and cities has been much written about and is touched on in the last chapter. Here the focus will be on individual situations and life stages, and how involvement in Ashton Freehold in its first twenty years or so represented decisive transitional moments in people’s lives.

The decision to move out of Preston – or, for some, to see Ashton as their preferred home when moving to the town – was itself a significant one. For much of the first two decades there was substantial construction underway – as the streets nearest Preston were filled with houses, building activity moved on to Beech Grove, Newton Road, Rose Terrace and Grosvenor Place. The risk of ‘falling over one or two loads of bricks, tumbling into a pit of new run lime’ was noted as late as 1877.² Existing networks carried onto the estate probably provided some moral and social support for early residents, but for many there were the added responsibilities of house ownership and membership of the land society. Although still within walking distance, Preston’s town centre, its shops and places of worship and entertainment were less accessible and public transport over the first decade was erratic. For women in particular the changes must have been significant.

¹ HJ Dyos, *Victorian Suburb* (1961) pp82-3.

² *PC*, 24 March 1877.

It is plausible that, by choosing to live on Ashton Freehold, many residents were creating a new identity as well as a new life outside urban Preston. Without personal accounts it is impossible to know if this was a conscious aim or simply part of the motivations that led to life in Ashton. It is unlikely, however, that being an owner or resident on Ashton Freehold in its first decades was a decision taken lightly.

Safety in numbers

Although less than two miles from Preston, Ashton Freehold was not as obviously connected to Preston as the Fulwood Freehold estate. Its road links were more recent, and its transport links less reliable. The move to a new estate still under construction must have required a certain confidence, especially without the wealth that Fulwood residents seemed to possess. The decision to invest in – and especially to move to – a new suburb must have been helped by having family, friends or associates alongside. It is therefore not surprising that social, business, geographical, religious and political networks can be traced back to Preston and its wider mid-Victorian history. Such networks have been discussed by Morgan, Lewis and others in relation to Preston's social and professional elite and by Anderson in the town's working-class communities.³ However they focus on the early Victorian period and at best offer only passing commentary on the kind of people involved in Ashton Freehold and their connections, which are explored here.⁴

Family ties in the first decade include the Addison brothers who built the semi-detached Highfield Place on Waterloo Road, the Archer brothers who were renting on Victoria Parade and Garden Walk, and the Smith brothers, who owned and lived in Poplar Villas on Waterloo Road. The connections between women are more elusive,

³ N Morgan, *Social and Political Leadership in Preston 1820–60* (thesis, Lancaster University, 1980); B Lewis, *The Middlemost and the Milltowns: Bourgeois Culture and Politics in Early Industrial England* (Stanford University Press, 2002); Anderson, *Family Structure* (1971).

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, the biographical details in this chapter are pieced together from newspapers and census, marriage and other family records on www.ancestry.co.uk.

but perhaps more revealing. The Smith brothers were married to sisters, Jane and Mary Richardson, whose younger sister, Alice, married James Gregson, and whose father, with another sister, lived on Beech Grove in 1871. A fifth Richardson sister was stepmother to Daniel Allsup, who bought part of Willow Bank a few years later. Family and business ties overlap with James Gregson and William Monk. They built and lived in the semi-detached Laurel Villas on Tulketh Road, while partners in the iron foundry, Gregson and Monk. William also married an Alice, in his case James' sister.

Geographical ties include those on the Market Place in Preston, where the Smith brothers ran the family hatting business. Robert and Maria Roe were drapers on the Market Place and living on Tulketh Road by 1864, while Edmund Rowbotham remained living and trading as a bootmaker on the Market Place, and sold his plots on Long Lane to William Smith, who later built his detached home there. Also linked by geography were three residents on Hawkshead Street in 1851. This short street of small, terraced houses off Bow Lane was home to James and Mary Brocklebank, who built Almond Cottage on Tulketh Road, William Monk above, and Thomas Coulthard, the accountant, who was ten years younger. That they all became owners of freehold suburban houses within twenty years also indicates something of the social movement possible in the mid-Victorian period.

The few identified Catholics involved in Ashton Freehold can be linked to St Wilfrid's church in Preston.⁵ The early trustee Richard Carr, the widow Eliza Walmsley, and James Sherliker, who built Guild Cottage on Waterloo Road, all had family buried in St Wilfrid's graveyard. Sherliker appears to have rented his house briefly to the Catholic widow of a fellow tin worker, shortly before her death there. In 1861, six Ashton Freehold dwellers or investors were involved in the Preston branch of the Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control, a non-conformist organisation campaigning for the disestablishment of the Church of England.⁶

⁵ Burial records and biographies relating to St Wilfred's Catholic Cemetery, Preston, Lancashire http://www.mit-stamtrae.co.uk/st_wilfrids/st_wilfrids_preston_index.htm.

⁶ *PC*, 11 December 1861. Chase states that the society's journal endorsed the freehold land movement and encouraged dissenters to use the opportunity to gain the vote, 'Out of Radicalism' (1991) p322 fn1.

There were other networks such as the political ones mentioned in the first chapter, and all must have helped to create a community on Ashton Freehold, as well as retaining ties to Preston. Not all of those mentioned remained on the estate, but by 1881 there is evidence of families intermarrying, people who had rented out their houses coming to occupy them, and a second generation choosing to remain on the estate. Ashton Freehold provided a melting pot for people from different socio-economic groups to meet or to establish themselves. Priscilla Sellers, mentioned in the next section, was a shop assistant working for the Fishergate draper, Frederick Thorp. Ten years later they were both living on Ashton Freehold, Thorp in a large house on Beech Grove and Sellers in a semi-detached villa owned by her millowner husband. It also seems unlikely, but for shared location, that Rosetta Plant, the daughter of a well-established solicitor who built a large house on Tulketh Road, would have married Thomas Addison, who lived with his widowed mother in a small semi-detached house on Waterloo Road.

Women on Ashton Freehold

Many of the sources for Ashton Freehold concern men – as owners, heads of household, ratepayers and electors. Women’s histories on the estate have been concealed by changes of name on marriage, while their presence on official records was restricted by lack of voting and property rights. The story of women’s lives in the suburbs is frequently told as one of isolation, restriction and boredom – or alternatively as a place of sexual repression and femininity that emasculated men.⁷ Although this representation can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, it gained particular traction in the later Victorian period, and post-dates Ashton Freehold’s early years. In the 1860s, the women involved in the estate certainly lacked important legal rights, but many were born in the early years of the nineteenth century in working class families, which must have shaped their values and expectations. While

⁷ S Bilston, ‘Your vile suburbs can offer nothing but the deadness of the grave’: the Stereotyping of Early Victorian Suburbia.’ *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41:4 (2013) pp621-42.

it is impossible to know what women felt about living on Ashton Freehold, there are sufficient glimpses into their experiences to merit a special focus here.

The model rules for building societies stated categorically that ‘neither a minor nor a female shall be competent to serve in any office in this Society’. However, in James Taylor’s speech to Preston Freehold Land Society in 1850, when Fulwood Freehold was established, he stressed his support for women as not just members but also as ‘committee-men’.⁸ His optimism appears unfounded in that case. Ten years later, Ashton Freehold Land Society allowed women members, but the Rules, stating that ‘he’ or ‘him’ referred also to women, applied this to shareholders only – thus tacitly excluding women from holding any official position. There is no evidence of women holding shares in the society or attending any of its meetings or later ratepayer meetings.

Assuming that the original members of the Ashton society were men, there were nonetheless nine female heads of household in the 1871 census. They were all recorded as widows, two around 30 years old, the remainder in their fifties and older. At least four had been widowed over the past decade, almost certainly while living on Ashton Freehold. The young widows and two others were annuitants, while another three were described as housekeepers (something that will be discussed shortly). The remaining two were defined by specific occupations – Jane Stopforth was a retired farmer, and Maria Roe a retired draper. This suggests that they had played active roles alongside their husbands in businesses that were often run jointly by a couple.⁹ It is clear these women wished to be defined by their occupations by the census enumerator. It also suggests that they aligned themselves as much with other workers as the middle classes.

The term annuitant encompasses a wide variety of experiences. Eliza Walmsley was in her late twenties when her corn merchant husband died, leaving her with four young

⁸ PC, 2 February 1850.

⁹ T Evans, ‘Women, Marriage and the Family’ and H Barker, ‘Women and Work’, in *Women’s History: Britain, 1700–1850 An Introduction*, H Barker and E Chalus (eds), (Routledge, 2005) pp64, 138.

children. She remained in their large house on Moor Park until a sudden move to Ashton Freehold just before the 1871 census.¹⁰ Her house in 1871 was probably rented, but by 1881 she had built The Florida on Tulketh Road, a large house on three plots where she remained until at least 1891. Betsy Steble on the other hand, although a vicar's widow, lived in one of Samuel Wilson's small houses on Bank Place with their two teenage children. It is not clear what brought them to Preston, but it seems that Betsy, a second wife, was not supported by her husband's son, who as future Mayor of Liverpool and MP was presumably in a position to do so. Widowhood was not uncommon, but it appears that Ashton Freehold was seen as somewhere safe – and perhaps supportive – both to continue living, and to move to.

The three 'housekeepers' were all aged around sixty. In each case they had one or more working sons living with them, whose wages must have funded or contributed to the household expenses. Their census identification as heads, however, suggests that they were – or considered themselves – the owner or main occupier of the house. In this context, the use of the term 'housekeeper' is not unusual. However, the 1871 enumerator for Ashton Freehold has consistently used 'Housekeeper' against all wives not having a specific occupation, contrary to instructions.¹¹ Joseph Roscoe was 29 years old and lived just outside Ashton Freehold at Pleasant View Terrace on Tulketh Road. He was employed as a relieving officer, a typical local government role for those doing this temporary job.¹² His father had been enumerator in Preston in 1861, and had also recorded most wives as housekeepers. A survey of returns for several Preston census districts for that year shows that generally wives' occupations were left blank unless specific, with only occasional use of housekeeper. It appears to be an idiosyncrasy passed down from father to son, but suggests an unusual recognition – and valuing – of women's work in the home at this period.¹³ By 1891 Roscoe was living on Garden Walk and ensured Mary Ellen, unlike most other wives listed, was given an occupation – 'Housewife'.

¹⁰ LA, DDX 564/4/1 Longworth and Gardner memorandum book, 1867–75.

¹¹ EJ Higgs, C Jones, K Schürer, A Wilkinson, *The Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM) Guide* (University of Essex, 2013) pp59-60, 69-70.

¹² Higgs and others, *Integrated Census Microdata* (2013) p18.

¹³ Barker, 'Women and Work' (2005) p124.

In 1881, under a different enumerator, there were twenty-two female heads of household on Ashton Freehold, and sixteen, including Eliza Walmsley, were left blank under occupation. A few of the male heads were also given no occupation, but this change from 1871 is striking. Stopforth and Roe still claimed their occupational status, along with a widowed letterpress printer and an unmarried dress and mantle maker, but the only 'housekeeper' was an employee in that role at the largest property, Highfield on Tulketh Road.

The agency of married women may well be concealed by their lack of property, until legislation in 1870 and 1882 gradually permitted them to control their own earnings and inherited property.¹⁴ Within the household, they may have had an equal say on financial matters, but any conveyances of property or official documentation were in their husband's name. In consequence, the evidence is primarily about single and widowed women's property management. Sarah Thompson, whose niece Constance was the mother of historian AJP Taylor, built a house on Beech Grove. The planning application makes it clear that this is her project, as do her initials and the date, 1881, incorporated into the house. She never married and appears to have used the house to generate income, while continuing to live with her sister and brother-in-law in the family home next door. AJP Taylor's description of the family suggests that Sarah was probably a clever, rather sharp woman with strong sense of superiority.¹⁵ Maria Aspden also built houses on land she owned on Rose Terrace. Over the next few years she built Rozel Villas, a pair of semi-detached houses, then the detached Dalry House on the adjoining plot, where she lived in 1891 with her also unmarried sister.¹⁶ She may have inherited the land from her father or uncle, both ginger-beer brewers in Preston and possibly original members of the freehold land society. Anna Maria Carlisle owned a pair of houses on Garden Walk by 1880, living in one and renting out the other. In 1871 she was an upper housemaid at Penwortham Hall, but was left a

¹⁴ M Finn, 'Women, Consumption and Coverture in England, c1760–1860', *The Historical Journal*, 39:3 (1996), pp703-22. Finn argues that women were able to achieve greater economic and legal autonomy than is generally acknowledged before these acts were passed, and that women's personal experience was less limited than the earlier legislation would suggest.

¹⁵ LA, CBP/2 for Ashton planning applications after 1880; AJP Taylor, *A Personal History* (Hamish Hamilton, 1983) pp5-6.

¹⁶ LA, CBP/82/3/122-131 Sewer maps, 1880.

substantial annuity of £150 when her employer died unmarried in 1874. She chose to invest in property, and probably, like the widows mentioned, saw Ashton as a safe and perhaps also accepting place to live.

The twenty servants working in Ashton households in 1871 were all women but in rather different circumstances to Carlisle. A cook and housemaid worked for Eliza Walmsley, but the others were all general domestics. Most were in their teens or early twenties – the youngest just twelve – and all were unmarried. Only two had been born in Preston, the rest from further afield. Further research might indicate how their life on Ashton Freehold related to their past and future.

From 1870, the Married Women's Property Act meant married women could hold and control property such as earnings and inheritance, but it was not retrospective. The Shaw sisters show how marriage – or not – affected women's ownership rights. Joseph Shaw, the Cannon Street provision dealer who claimed a county vote, appears to have built his four houses on Garden Walk Terrace for his four daughters. His son-in-law, John Crompton, also claimed a vote against one of the houses, with ownership based on his marriage in 1854 to second daughter, Mary. Her sister Sarah Smith, married the same year, moved to Blackburn and from there to Southport. Although still living with her husband, intriguingly her name appears as owner in 1880 and 1885. The eldest sister, Jane, who married and then separated from Simeon Hooton, is also recorded as owner. The houses were usually rented out. It is only in an 1882 directory that the unmarried youngest daughter, Betsy, was found to be living in her house, joined in 1891 by Jane, who was letting out her house next door. It is clear that Joseph Shaw's farsightedness provided for his daughters for the long term, enabling them to live off the rents. For Jane, that financial independence probably allowed her to separate from her husband.

The dilemma of women who had married unsuccessfully was very real in the Victorian period. Although legislative reform had made divorce more accessible in 1857, it was still expensive and required evidence of adultery or desertion. One of the supposed widows heading a household in 1871 was in fact living apart from her husband, who

did not die for another two decades – Susannah Atherstone probably lacked the means to divorce, so with her husband living in Yorkshire, she reinvented herself as a widow and chose Ashton as a place to facilitate this. There was at least one divorce on Ashton Freehold. Jacob Seller’s son John deserted his wife Priscilla for a new, bigamous life in America. Although the divorce was in 1894, it shows how Ashton Freehold seems to have become a community that supported a woman abandoned by her husband. After the divorce, Priscilla married George Margerison, a widowed neighbour. Although they moved away, Priscilla’s three children remained living on and around Ashton Freehold.

A further fleeting indication of women’s lives on Ashton Freehold is provided by discussions at a ratepayers’ meeting about the need for streetlighting in 1877.¹⁷ Reference is made to a couple of recent attempts to attack women in Ashton (not necessarily on the Freehold), but overall the concern is that women should be able to ‘leave their homes and return with some sort of safety’. From this, it may be concluded that women walking, during the day or in the dark, was commonplace and accepted on Ashton Freehold, contrary to some narratives about Victorian women’s freedom.

The idea of separate spheres for men and women, and the ‘Angel in the House’, is commonly cited in reference to the suburbs.¹⁸ The reality was more complex and frequently dependent on local factors, intersecting with national changes in religion, politics and the economy.¹⁹ Ashton Freehold was created at perhaps a pivotal point in national social and political developments that were to impact on women’s experiences, as well as reflecting the evolution of industrial Preston.²⁰ There are examples of women who were proud of their working roles and who were financially independent and house developers. The estate appears to have offered women security and opportunities to establish lives without a husband, whether widowed,

¹⁷ PC, 24 March 1877.

¹⁸ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes* (2002); Bilston, “Your vile suburbs” (2013); Tosh, *A Man’s Place* (1999).

¹⁹ Barker and Chalus, *Women’s History* pp4-7.

²⁰ K Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Palgrave, 2001) p6.

single, separated or divorced. It may be that, as a new community, created by a movement rooted in radical change, its inhabitants tended to tolerance.

Embracing change

This final section arises from previous discussions and will address why people chose to become members of Ashton Freehold Land Society and invest financially or personally in its new housing estate and the community created. As the final chapter will show, Preston was unusually late for a town of its size in establishing suburbs, suggesting that the usual push factors of escape from industrialisation and its accompanying dirt and noise were not as significant as elsewhere. Bristow remarked on 'the relative stability, lack of fundamental change, and the forces of inertia which seemed to have characterised industrialised Preston.'²¹ Early Ashton Freehold residents, however, were embracing change and taking a significant personal step. For some investing in Ashton Freehold was purely financial, as members of a type of building society or seeking the better rates payable outside Preston, but by taking a longitudinal view of owners and residents it is possible to identify other motivating factors.

Hewitson's description of the developing suburb in 1872 quoted in the previous chapter continued:

In Ashton, as in every other newly-developed region, there are plenty of fine places afloat – "terraces," "villas," "groves," and kindred elysiums are well patronised ; ... There is a festive passion for colour poles, rigged up in a semi-nautical fashion, on the "freehold" part of Ashton. Gardening is also a great business amongst the population. For ever of gardens are there in the district ; and all of them seem well cared for.²²

²¹ BR Bristow, *Residential Differentiation in Mid-19th Century Preston* (thesis, Lancaster University, 1982), p417.

²² Hewitson, *Our Country Churches* (1872) p37. 'Colour poles' are probably flagpoles, seen in images of this period.

His descriptions generally ring true and he had a journalist's keen eye for the details that showed the character of people and places. In describing Ashton, he highlights some of the key elements that seem to have attracted people to the estate.

The comments on the 'nomenclature' on the estate and its conjuring of a residential paradise are borne out by the names of streets and houses. These indicate the expectations of life in Ashton sought by the society and individual owners. The four streets bounding the estate are prosaic in two cases – Long Lane and, initially, Ashton New Road, later Tulketh Road. The other two mark the recent death of Lord Wellington and his victory at Waterloo. Victoria Parade paid homage to the queen, and claimed association with royalty, as perhaps did Grosvenor Place with the smart London streets built on the land owned by that noble family. In three names however, there is the sense of escaping to a rural idyll in Beech Grove, Garden Walk and Rose Terrace. Prospect Place, too, laid claim to the open views over the river to the fields beyond.

The names chosen for houses were carved on gateposts or plaques and often similarly rustic. Among the earliest are Ivy Cottage, Highfield Place, Holly Bank, The Poplars, The Firs, Willow Bank, Laurel Bank and Woodbine Cottage. Many had Villa in their name, reflecting the perceived middle-class associations with that style of house, although often in Ashton it was attached to a pair of smaller semi-detached homes. A revealing indication of people's aspirations for life in Ashton is seen in the three houses with Hope in their names. Especially touching is Happy Cottage on Tulketh Avenue.²³

The hopes placed in Ashton Freehold were not just about quality of life, but also about social status and the perceptions of those around them. Middle-class status in the mid-Victorian period was not merely about wealth or occupation, it also focused on identity manifested in a particular style of living.²⁴ The area and type of house lived in, and especially geographical detachment from the urban core in a suburb, were

²³ L Wright, *Sunnyside: a History of British House Names* (The British Academy, 2020).

²⁴ Gunn, 'Class, Identity and the Urban' (2004) pp35-8.

important indicators. Membership of Ashton Freehold Land Society offered the opportunity to become a freehold landowner at relatively low cost, and potentially build a house among others of possibly higher status. That house might be no bigger than a terrace left behind in central Preston, but it made a clear statement of spatial and social differentiation. The small, detached houses built by the Brocklebanks and James Sherliker may be in that category. Sherliker named his house Guild Cottage for the 1862 Preston Guild, and added his initials. Samuel Wilson also fixed his initials to the houses he built for rent. In both cases, they were firmly attaching their identity to their investment in bricks and mortar on the estate.

The houses on Ashton Freehold might not have been bigger, but they sat on larger plots with, for most, gardens on at least three sides. As well as outdoor space, this provided a greater degree of privacy from neighbours. Over the Victorian period, privacy became increasingly desirable as the focus on the domestic family unit grew, prompted by the promotion of middle-class, religious values.²⁵ In Preston, most houses not only had limited outdoor areas, but these also contained the cess pits serving the household toilets. For most of the town's population, such yards and privies were shared. Until the mid-1860s, even the residents of elegant Winckley Square relied on the collection of 'night soil' from the cess pits and on sewers based on culverted watercourses.²⁶ On Ashton Freehold the streets were built with sewers running down their centre, and a lengthy clause in the conditions specified in detail the type, size and quality of pipes, the provision of stench traps and the appropriate incline for effective flow to the sewers.²⁷ William Pye's early 1860s pair of houses on Beech Grove each had two water closets, in the scullery and upstairs.²⁸ The ability to perform one's ablutions without sharing facilities, smells or awareness with neighbours was a significant advantage of the new estate over Preston.

²⁵ G Davison, 'The Suburban Idea and its Enemies', *Journal of Urban History* 39:5 (2013) pp830-32.

²⁶ Timmins, *Built Environment Transformed* (2021) pp94-5.

²⁷ Deeds to The Firs, 1862.

²⁸ *PH*, 17 October 1863.

For some of course, financial investment and reward was the main driver in becoming a member of the Ashton society. A number of those involved were serial promoters of local building societies, including the early committee members James Chetwin, John Howarth and John Bibby, although both the latter also chose Ashton Freehold for their homes. The builder and joiner, William Pye, saw a business opportunity, as may have Edward Parkinson, a house carpenter, and Charles Seward, working for his father's gas-heating business. After Pye's financial difficulties in the 1860s, his business appears to have flourished. In 1875 he was advertising two 'good Houses' on Ashton Freehold, either for sale or to let for £20 annual rental.²⁹ By 1881, he had sixteen employees, and was established as a long-term resident on Beech Grove. Although Pye might be deemed a speculative builder, that term is often used to describe 'less respectable men, whose eyes were fixed on quick profits rather than solid building'.³⁰



Fig 3.1 10 Beech Grove, probably one of the pair built by William Pye described in 1863.

²⁹ *PH*, 26 May 1875.

³⁰ Dyos, 'Speculative Builders' (1982) p161.

Pye however seems to have been particularly proud of his workmanship. Two houses for sale in October 1863 are almost certainly his (Fig 3.1), and are described in detail.³¹ 'Built with the greatest attention, both as to choice of materials and excellent workmanship', they had an early example of cavity walling, plate-glass windows, piped gas supply to all rooms, and a water-closet on both floors. Pye seems to have been committed to building the quality of houses on Ashton Freehold that he was happy to live in himself. He was not alone, as Parkinson, Seward and others in related businesses were also resident on the estate, some for decades.

Other residents were both owner-occupiers and landlords.³² The Smith brothers not only built their large semi-detached homes on Waterloo Road, but bought further plots and built houses for rent or for family members to occupy. James Sherliker built two more houses next to Guild Cottage, which he rented out. As noted earlier, several lived in one semi-detached house and let the other, such as James Hargreaves of Holly Bank.

Ashton Freehold seems to have provided a stepping stone out of Preston and urban life for several residents. They subsequently moved on, either further into the rural areas, such as JJ Smith to Cadley and Thomas Coulthard to Ashton Bank, or to larger houses in Fulwood, like James Gregson the ironfounder at Highgate House. More residents, however, appear to have seen Ashton as a place to put down roots and establish family security through owning their house. The Brocklebanks held onto their house through apparently difficult periods. The two Addison brothers who built the semi-detached Highfield Place both died within a few years, but Catherine Addison managed to keep both houses in the family, by letting one and probably taking out a private mortgage, until her son Thomas was able to set up his own home next door to her. Both houses were still in family occupation in 1891. John Grimshaw was living on Victoria Parade from 1864 and bequeathed the house to his widowed daughter, Eliza Stothert, who remained there until her death thirty years later. Those renting also put down roots in Ashton. Levi Woolley was a tenant of WH Smith for over twenty years,

³¹ *PH*, 17 October 1863.

³² Unless otherwise stated, the details in these paragraphs are pieced together from directories, census records, deeds, 1880 sewer maps, 1885 Valuation List, electoral registers and fieldwork.

while Stephen Ward, who worked his way up from clerk to mill manager in the cotton industry, first rented on Garden Walk Terrace then moved to a semi-detached house on Prospect Place. His son was still living there – perhaps by then the owner – when he died in 1946.

Henry Davies, the accountant for the Local Health Board, is something of an anomaly on Ashton Freehold as an exceptionally wealthy man from his interests in coal and iron. He left over £100,000 on his death in 1908, but although living in Lancaster for the past decade or so, he chose to be buried in St Andrew's Ashton churchyard.³³

Richard Seed, whose high aspirations were never quite met by his finances, also rests in the churchyard. He apparently never lived in his house on Rose Terrace. His tenants, John Greenall and his wife, ran an 'Educational Establishment for Young Ladies' there for at least twenty years, which was continued by Seed's daughter, when the family at last took possession in the 1890s. Seed did however move to Ashton Freehold and was living there on Garden Walk – renting according to the electoral register – when he died in 1870, leaving the security of house ownership to his widow and daughters.

The discussion of women's lives proposed that Ashton Freehold was a safe haven for widows and single women. It is also possible that this was why newcomers to Preston chose to live in Ashton. If unacquainted with industrial towns or unsure of where to find others of a similar outlook, they might find a new estate and a garden as buffer to the wider world were a less risky option. Garden Walk in 1871 had a notably younger age profile than other streets, due to four residents who were almost certainly renting and had moved on by the time of the next census. One was a Preston-born widow, but the others were schoolmasters and a railway auditor, in transient roles and born elsewhere, in Scotland and Norfolk.

However, three-quarters of the total residents in 1871 were born in Lancashire, of whom 113 in Preston and 32 in Ashton, and thirty of the households had at least one

³³ *England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations)*, (1908) p21.

adult born in Preston.³⁴ All the eight heads of household described as retired in 1871 were Lancashire-born. It is not clear whether they had moved to Ashton Freehold on retirement or earlier, although several were only in their forties when the freehold land society was set up. It is possible that they saw this as an opportunity to facilitate their retirement, perhaps putting their accumulated income and assets into a property that would leave their family secure on their death. James Sherliker, the retired tin plate worker, and William Harrison, a retired publican, were both owner-occupiers in the cluster of early houses on Waterloo Road. These are therefore almost certainly original members who wasted no time in exploiting the opportunity. Both also invested in further plots and houses which must have provided some income in their retirement. Sherliker's shop and house on Friargate were advertised to let in 1868, probably marking his retirement – at the relatively young age of 46 – and move to Ashton where he was the freeholder, not the tenant.³⁵ He was therefore roughly the mean – and median – average age of 48 years for householders in 1871, who ranged from 23 to 73 years old. Those in the terraced houses on Bank Place and Garden Walk Terrace were slightly older on average. The age profile overall suggests that, whether owners or renters, many householders had been working for several decades and had established themselves financially.

Finally, to return to Hewitson and his comment about the popularity of gardening on the estate, the opportunities offered by Ashton Freehold were not limited to houses. For some the land was important and provided a different business opportunity as a market gardener, like Thomas Bamford, or for the short-lived 'Wellington Gardens' which seem to have offered a cross between the pleasure gardens fashionable at the time and a modern garden centre.³⁶ For those who had lived in Preston's better terraced streets in Avenham, a garden was perhaps the one significant gain in moving

³⁴ Of the remainder, thirteen were born in Yorkshire, thirteen in Cumberland and Westmorland, and the rest primarily in the Midlands, but also Scotland, Anglesey, Norfolk, London, three children born in Canada, and a wife in East India. The figures for migration are not dissimilar to Anderson's, who found that 48% of Preston's population was born in the town. The exception is those from Ireland – only the two Walmsley servants were Irish on Ashton Freehold – reflecting the working-class demographic for Preston's Irish residents.

³⁵ *PC*, 11 April 1868.

³⁶ *PC*, 31 May, 7 June 1862.

to an Ashton house that might be no bigger. In this they shared the same motivations as those promoting the garden suburb movement several decades later. For the several farmers on the estate, the opportunity to remain in a more rural area yet have the amenities of good housing was a probable draw. William Tuson, who had been farming at Tong farm on the other side of Long Lane, was able to sell up and build himself a house for his retirement on Victoria Parade.

Conclusion

The opportunities offered by membership of Ashton Freehold Land Society were seized by early owners for different reasons. Those who were older, and well-established in their careers and financially, were able to consider retirement with the security of property behind them. Those working in the building and related trades had new business opportunities as well as the chance to acquire land at a low price to build their own homes. Those who had been farmers or who came from rural areas elsewhere could continue to live somewhere with plenty of green space. Although for some the society must primarily have been a financial investment, nonetheless many of the builders and landlords made a home on the estate sooner or later. For them all, their links to Ashton Freehold were a personal, social or financial commitment to an unknown enterprise that took them to a new environment and, perhaps, higher status.

The case of Ashton Freehold casts light on how the aspirant or successful lower-middle classes were able to use the mechanism of a freehold land society – even after the movement's heyday – to become property owners and suburban residents in the mid-Victorian period. Both this section of society and this period are comparatively under-researched, with many conclusions drawn from the evidence of the perhaps more straightforward pre-1850 and post-1870 years – and from the more readily definable working and 'middle-middle' classes. While there are similarities to other freehold land society developments, Ashton Freehold seems to fit neither the model of working-class housing nor the firmly middle-class estates. These findings contribute to new understanding of the motivations that inspired the less wealthy but thriving people in

industrial towns to remove themselves from a polluted and cramped environment. The commonly cited drivers for removal to the suburbs – improved transport and the ‘march of bricks and mortar’ filling streets of speculative housing – do not apply in the case of Ashton Freehold. The individuals involved shared no single political or religious affiliation, nor social status beyond having neither too little nor too much wealth and influence. These insights into the new estate created outside Preston, but predominantly by Preston people, will contribute in the next chapter to an examination of the situation in the mid-century which may have prompted the development of what became one of the town’s earliest suburbs.

Chapter 4

Preston in transition

Introduction

This final chapter returns to Ashton Freehold Land Society's origins in the Preston of the 1850s and 1860s. Having shown that the estate was arguably not as 'middle-class' as perceived, and discussed the motivations for moving to a new, out-of-town community, these findings will be set in the context of Preston's mid-Victorian development. As Bristow says, by the 1850s:

'most towns of the size and status of Preston could boast their high quality residential suburbs; entrepreneurs had obtained land on the periphery of the town, or even detached from the town, and erected houses of a type to attract the better-off members of society. This had not happened in Preston'.¹

Preston's population had reached 50,000 by 1841, a size which had triggered suburban development in many towns and cities of the nineteenth century.² Residents were subject to the 'repulsiveness' of town-centre living caused by overwhelmed sanitary provision, and the impact of industrial pollution.³ Bristow goes on to suggest further research is needed: 'with the deteriorating town-centre conditions, it would be fascinating to know at what time and at what rate the middle classes (and especially the shopkeepers) decided to abandon the centre for residential purposes'.⁴

This chapter will propose that for the shopkeepers and lower middle classes the answer to the first part of that question is around 1860, and that Ashton Freehold provided the first real opportunity for those Preston residents. In doing so, it will consider the situation in Preston in the 1850s and the other suburban candidates, relating these to debates about the physical drivers for suburban development, such as land and transport.

¹ Bristow, *Residential Differentiation* (1982) pp79-80, 422.

² Thompson, 'Rise of Suburbia' (1982) p5.

³ Dyos, *Victorian Suburb* (1961) p23; *The Builder*, 7 and 14 December 1861.

⁴ Bristow, *Residential Differentiation* (1982) p422.

In 1860, Ashton Freehold offered an escape to the country, 'with the benefit of being free from the heavy Taxes of the Borough of Preston', but this situation lasted only twenty years.⁵ In 1880, 'urban Ashton' was absorbed into the borough of Preston. The implications of the changing relationship between Ashton Freehold and Preston, both before and after this date, will complete the chapter.

Mid-century Preston

Preston's population had increased by between 36% and 50% in each of the decades from 1801 to 1851, but in the ten years to 1861 this had slowed to 19%.⁶ In 1861, the population of the borough (which included Fishwick) was 82,985, over an area of 2,753 acres.⁷ In contrast, the rural Lea, Ashton, Ingol and Cottam townships covering over 4,500 acres had 911 residents.⁸

Hardwick described Preston in the 1850s as 'generally and deservedly recognised as one of the cleanest and most pleasantly situated of the manufacturing towns in England'.⁹ He dismissed as 'the occasional carpings of a splenetic traveller' the contrary views of visitors such as Dickens, who described it as a 'nasty place' in 1854.¹⁰ Both could be true, depending on where you chose to look. As those writing a few years later during the cotton crisis make clear, the new banks and chapels on Fishergate and the fine houses in Winckley Square and Avenham were only steps away from areas of poor housing and significant deprivation, even in better times.¹¹ Throughout the Victorian period, Preston's sickness and mortality rates were among the highest in the country.¹²

⁵ PC, 11 August 1855. The lower rates payable in Ashton feature in sales notices throughout the 1850s, including for the land bought by Ashton Freehold.

⁶ Anderson, *Family Structure* (1971) p202 fn61.

⁷ JM Wilson, *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales* (1870-72).

⁸ Slater's *Directory of Lancashire* (1869) p591.

⁹ Hardwick, *History* (1857) pp426-7.

¹⁰ J Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens, Volume 3: 1852-1870* (Chapman & Hall, 1874) p49.

¹¹ *The Builder*, 1861; *Manchester Daily Examiner and Times*, 27 May, 7 June 1862.

¹² Anderson, *Family Structure* (1971) p34; Hunt, *History of Preston* (2009) pp183-93.

Bristow carried out a detailed geographical analysis of Preston's population based primarily on the 1851 census, but including data from 1861. He suggested that Preston's lack of middle-class suburbs reflected a general satisfaction with the housing available within the urban area, and a preference for the convenience of urban living among the professional and business people who might have been expected to move out.¹³ A few had acquired country houses in the surrounding areas, but the town's affluent middle class seemed satisfied with Winckley Square and Ribblesdale Place's large houses with gardens. Although most of the other better houses were terraced, and superficially little different from cheaper ones, they took advantage of open spaces in the squares around churches such as St Ignatius, or of the elevation and river views just off Fishergate Hill. Preston's topography on a riverside plateau already provided the elevated site associated with middle-class suburban development. The residents around Avenham could turn their backs on the workers' housing and industry, reasonably confident that there would be no unwelcome building between them and the river.¹⁴

Morgan identified much of the Avenham area as home to his Stylish and Comfortable residents, noting that the difference between the Comfortable and the adjacent Respectable could be clearly demarcated on a map of Preston. Bristow also found a similar buffer zone between higher-class and poorer streets in the area around Lathom and Frenchwood Streets, on the east side of Avenham. Here, 'slightly superior terraces and no industrial activities' appealed to 'lower-professional classes and the labour aristocracy'. He postulated that aspirants to higher social status spent their earlier adult years here, and there were indeed a number of future Ashton Freehold residents living in this area in 1851 and 1861.¹⁵

Crossick defined the 'lower middle class' as having an essentially local role in the community, without strong outside contacts, and suggested that as a result they were

¹³ Bristow, *Residential Differentiation* (1982) pp79-80.

¹⁴ The railways did impinge on their view from 1838, but equally made the canal tramway across Avenham redundant.

¹⁵ Bristow, *Residential Differentiation* (1982) pp167, 180.

likely to be averse to change.¹⁶ If this is the case, then Preston's shopkeepers and smaller tradesmen may have been content with life on the edge of the wealthier and healthier areas of town for longer than other urban dwellers. However, the expansion of Preston's population, albeit slowing by 1859, must also have contributed to the increasing number of non-manual workers and to the prosperity of small businessmen. The existing better housing areas had little room for expansion, constrained by the river, the town centre and the encircling mills and their workers' houses. Demand, therefore, for 'Respectable' houses must also have increased, making the opportunity of 'leap-frogging' into a new area both desirable and necessary.¹⁷ Nonetheless, as late as 1863, a local commentator could write: 'In consequence of the superior natural advantages which Preston enjoys, there is not so much living outside by tradesmen as their [sic] is in the neighbourhoods of Manchester or Liverpool. Here it is the exception; there it is almost the rule.'¹⁸

Preston's early suburbs

Preston had remained a tightly contained urban area well into the 1800s. Initial development filled in the burgage plots and town fields, and clustered around the early mills and canal basin to the east and west of the town. Much early nineteenth-century housing development was associated with mills, led by Horrocks' weaving 'colonies' around their spinning mills at New Hall Lane and Spittal Moss.¹⁹ Expansion into the surrounding farmland began in the 1830s, when larger landowners began to develop their own holdings for housing. At this point, depending on definitions, Preston might be said to be developing suburbs, although, as in the quotation above, locally this term seemed to be used for the areas beyond the borough boundary, which in 1835 were 'becoming studded with mansions and villas'.²⁰ Hardwick wrote in 1857 of 'the active energy and commercial enterprise of Preston' absorbing the suburbs,

¹⁶ Crossick, 'Lower Middle Class' (1977) pp14-15.

¹⁷ Dyos, *Victorian Suburb* (1966) p23.

¹⁸ *PH*, 16 May 1863.

¹⁹ Hunt, *History of Preston* (2009) pp178-9.

²⁰ *PC*, 27 June 1835.

though seems to mean the encroachment of the railways and mills on the open countryside. Morgan referred to early Victorian Avenham as a suburban development, but in general it is only with the development of Fulwood Freehold that Preston has a named suburb.²¹

Fulwood is certainly the first cohesive housing development by and for Preston's middle classes. As described in the first chapter, the promises of 'working-class self-help' promoted by James Taylor came to nothing. In practice, the estate developed by Preston Freehold Land Society was led by prominent and influential men such as the temperance leader, Joseph Livesey, and architect, Richard Veevers. It was built just over the borough boundary of the Moor brook, on elevated farmland looking south over Moor Park. Wealthy manufacturers were already building houses on Moor Park Avenue and along Garstang Road, making Fulwood Freehold arguably a continuation of that middle-class development.

Fulwood and Ashton have generally been described as 'Preston's middle-class suburbs' without further analysis. Bristow – in a perhaps throwaway assessment – described Fulwood as middle-class and Ashton as middle/upper-class.²² Fulwood's history has had more attention than Ashton's, and here the focus will be on its socio-economic character in relation to Ashton.²³ The previous chapters concluded that Ashton Freehold was initially socially mixed, with both wealthier professionals or manufacturers and manual workers at either end of a disparate majority ranging from clerks and carpenters to mill managers and master tradesmen.

Boxall used Armstrong's methodology to analyse the socio-economic status of Fulwood Freehold residents. She concluded that from 1861 to 1891, Group 2 'consistently accounted for over 60% of residents', and Groups 1 and 2 were also

²¹ *PC*, 27 June 1835; Hardwick, *History* (1857) p511; Morgan, *Desirable Dwellings* (1995) Ch1.4.

²² Bristow, *Residential Differentiation* (1982) pp80-1. His awareness of Ashton's development seems to rest on sources such as plans for villas in 1853, which came to nothing, and is perhaps shaped by the popularity of the countryside around Ashton with some of Morgan's out-of-town Grand category.

²³ A Hewitson, *Northward: Historic, Topographic, Residential, and Scenic Gleanings, &c, Between Preston and Lancaster* (Toulmin & Sons, 1900) p5-6; Boxall, *Suburbanisation* (1997); Knight and Burscough, *Historic Fulwood* (1998).

consistently over 75%. The remaining 25% of residents were predominantly providing services to their neighbours.²⁴ She also determined that over the same period more than 50% of households had at least one servant and several had up to three. The research for Ashton Freehold has only analysed socio-economic status for two decades in detail, but the comparable figures are 50% of households were in Groups 1 and 2 after one decade, reducing to 48% after two decades, almost certainly because of an increase in widowed annuitants. Less than a third of residents had servants in 1871. In 1881 there were 69 servants in 58 of the 143 Ashton households. Seven had two servants and one – the exceptionally large Highfield standing on Tulketh Road, and only partly on Ashton Freehold – had five.

As discussed above, Armstrong's methodology is unsatisfactory in many ways and open to different interpretations, which may be in play here. A full comparison between the freehold estates is beyond the scope of this research, but application of Royle's simpler and less subjective method to Fulwood Freehold residents after its first decade in 1861, places 87% of households in either Class II or Class III.²⁵ In contrast, the figure for Ashton Freehold is 51% after one decade in 1871. As in Ashton, the houses on the Fulwood estate vary in size, but they tend to be larger and, as plot sizes were larger, they occupy larger grounds. The only terraced housing on Fulwood Park is on the western boundary on Garstang Road, and was built by the society to provide an income to cover tithe payments.²⁶ Assuming these are the Park Terrace houses, in 1861 they appear to be let to family members of those on the rest of the estate. It is hard to disagree with Boxall's conclusion that 'despite the initial rhetoric of the Preston movement the members [of the Fulwood society] were primarily the middle class'. However, she argued that 'the bulk of the residents came from that lower middle class group that Burnett labelled 'petty tradesmen, shopkeepers and

²⁴ Boxall, *Suburbanisation* (1997) p68. Boxall does not show her workings in detail, so the comparison with Ashton Freehold may not be exact.

²⁵ There are seven proprietors of land or houses which suggest they were living off their own means so these have been placed in Class II. Similarly, holders of positions such as Collector of Taxes have been deemed to be professionals. The 40 households in Boxall's account are not clearly defined. This analysis uses the 40 households on Victoria, Upper and Lower Bank roads and Park Terrace. The ten on Watling Street show a more diverse profile, but not sufficient to change the overall argument.

²⁶ Hewitson, *Northward* (1900) p6.

bookkeepers'.²⁷ Superficially, that seems comparable with Ashton Freehold, but the evidence suggests that from the start Fulwood's residents were from a higher and clearly middle-class social tier. In response to Bristow's question therefore, while Fulwood in 1850 might be when Preston's existing 'middle class' began to move out of town, Ashton Freehold ten years later seems the point when the 'lower middle class' and aspirant tradesmen and shopkeepers were able to consider moving.

Suburban readiness

This section will touch briefly on two elements frequently raised in the literature on suburban development in the Victorian period and later – land and transport. The availability of suitable land was key to the development of suburbs. In Preston, as elsewhere, it was the gradual release of land by its owners – often inheritors, with less personal attachment, ready to exploit it – that enabled the town to spread. The Tomlinson estates of Green Bank and Ox Heys extended building to the west, while the Peel Hall estate was eventually exploited by the Lutwidge family to the north-east. Many retained the freehold, ensuring a continuing income from their land by selling leases to smaller builders.²⁸ As a result there was little freehold land available within Preston for smaller developers or, of course, freehold land societies. The Fulwood Freehold acquired the freehold of an individual farm and its land, Ribbleton Freehold Land Society bought an estate within the township of that name to the north-east of Preston, and the shadowy Penwortham society, across the river Ribble, seems to have been inspired by the sale of Malt Kiln farm.²⁹ The locations of the four societies are shown in Fig 4.1.

²⁷ Boxall, *Suburbanisation* (1997) pp59, 83.

²⁸ Hunt, *History of Preston* (2009) pp186-8; Morgan, *Deadly Dwellings* (1993) p34.

²⁹ Fulwood – PC, 21 September 1850; Ribbleton – PC, 27 August 1859; Penwortham – PC, 2 July and 22 October 1859.



Fig 4.1 Brown's map of Preston in 1889 showing the locations of the freehold land societies: Ashton to the north-west, Fulwood to the north, Ribbleton to the north-east. Just off the map to the south is the possible site for the proposed Penwortham society.

The sale of land did not however mean immediate development. The housing market was highly unpredictable and many estates, not just freehold land societies', developed slowly and piecemeal.³⁰ Elsewhere on the Tulketh Hall estate, the land south-east of Wellington Road was bought by Richard Threlfall and by Joseph Bray, both of whom commissioned plans in 1853 showing villas standing in large gardens.³¹ These areas were eventually developed as terraced housing, although the streets nearest Wellington Road were not built up until the end of the century. It seems the Tulketh Hall plans found insufficient interest from investors or potential residents, again suggesting that Preston's middle classes had limited interest in suburban life at that time. Two other factors may also have been relevant. Historians of suburbs talk about leapfrogging when describing how new suburban residents move out from the centre and beyond the immediate circle of less affluent or more industrial areas. Preston's mills and workers' housing were moving closer to its Ashton boundary near Tulketh Hall, so reducing the effectiveness of that particular leap. This area was also

³⁰ Chase, 'Out of Radicalism' (1991) p330; Thompson, 'Rise of Suburbia' (1982).

³¹ LA, DDPR 141/18-19 Plans for building sites on Tulketh Estate, 1853 – these are the plans which misled Bristow.

less elevated than the Ashton Freehold plateau, looking more directly over industrial Preston. Elevation was an important attribute for desirable estates, not just for views and airiness, but more prosaically for natural drainage and sewerage. Ashton Freehold's sewers appear to have run into the stream crossing the estate and down to the river Ribble, near what is now Powis Road.³²

Transport provision is at the heart of many suburban histories, with the question of whether it led or followed edge-of-town developments much debated, but tending to conclude that it was the latter.³³ Most of the discussion, however, relates to London and the large industrial cities rather than more compact towns like Preston, and focuses particularly on railways, perhaps because of their impact on urban geography as much as socially. Preston was an early railway town, partly due to its industrial importance, but primarily for its place on the west-coast route between London and Scotland, carved out over centuries as a main road. It seems that for Preston, the growing railway network was seen as a means of reaching more distant places rather than connecting adjacent communities. The Preston and Wyre Railway, instigated by Peter Hesketh-Fleetwood across his land, did not even have a private halt for Tulketh Hall. So, although the railway line formed the eastern boundary of the Freehold estate, it did not serve its residents. In 1865 a request was reportedly made for a station on the 'west-coast' line at Long Lane to serve Ashton and the surrounding townships, but this came to nothing.³⁴

Ashton Freehold was however 'within half-an-hour's walk of Preston', and so well within the definition of a 'walking town'.³⁵ Anderson's comment on Preston's compactness: 'Any reasonably fit adult could thus walk to anywhere in the town in under half an hour' is as relevant here.³⁶ Some of the early larger houses did have coach houses or stables, but this was not typical. When the four semi-detached Cane

³² Dyos, *Victorian Suburb*, p84; LA, CBP ACC9650/Roll/102 Sewer plan, 1880.

³³ Thompson, 'Rise of Suburbia' (1982) p19.

³⁴ *PH*, 24 June 1865.

³⁵ *PH*, 17 October 1863; Thompson, 'Rise of Suburbia' (1982) p6.

³⁶ Anderson, *Family Structure* (1971) p33.

Villas were sold in 1874, just one had a stable and coach house. By this time, there was an alternative – the houses were ‘within one minute's walk of the 'bus track’.³⁷

There had been a horse omnibus service before Ashton Freehold was established. In summer 1859, shortly after buses began running to Fulwood, a service began between ‘two of our most beautiful suburbs’, Walton-le-Dale and Ashton, via Preston.³⁸ Its introduction may have encouraged the freehold land society promoters into action. Almost a year later, with housebuilding under way, ‘a company of gentlemen resident at Ashton, or connected with that township’ took over the bus service, presumably seeing it as a sound investment as well as a convenience. The article stated that the buses to Fulwood had benefited the development and appeal of the freehold estate, and was beginning to do so in Ashton. It goes on to say that: ‘Frequent and cheap locomotion from the business parts of the town to the outskirts, such as omnibuses supply, will cause many persons engaged in trade to reside in the suburbs, who would otherwise be compelled to reside nearer their places of business.’³⁹ There is a strong sense that these people ‘engaged in trade’ are not the same as the tradesmen and shopkeepers who would make up a good proportion of Ashton Freehold’s early residents – horse-bus travel was predominantly middle class.⁴⁰ It is notable that the only bus service that seems to have kept running through the 1860s was that to Fulwood. Ashton’s buses continued erratically for a few years. They stopped running in spring 1861, but the popularity of his trips to the Pedder bankruptcy sale at Ashton Park must have encouraged Mr Smith of the Blackamoor pub to reinstate a regular service in July 1861. However, this dwindled swiftly to Saturday services only by the autumn.⁴¹ There was no service for two months in early 1862 after which there seem to have been no regular buses until 1870. A newspaper report in the mid-1860s blamed the heavy omnibus mileage tax for the lack of Preston services other than to

³⁷ *PH*, 12 September 1874.

³⁸ *PC*, 30 July 1859.

³⁹ *PC*, 5 May 1860.

⁴⁰ Thompson, ‘Rise of Suburbia’ (1982) pp174-6. In 1864, the Fulwood bus charged 1½d for an outside seat: *PC*, 26 March 1864.

⁴¹ *PC*, 7 August 1861.

Fulwood, although the cotton crisis and the relatively slow development on Ashton Freehold must have played a part.⁴²

It seems that the provision of public transport was not critical to Ashton's early development. When running, it probably encouraged interest in the estate, and its lack occasionally appeared to be a concern, but not sufficiently to be a barrier to residents. The horse buses were a very recent introduction, so many people must have relied primarily on walking and were not dependent on other means of transport. Nonetheless, the horse buses from 1870, the horse trams from late 1882, and the electric trams from 1904 were regularly mentioned in advertisements for houses on Ashton Freehold. Although there was a shop with post office and bakery on Garden Walk by 1881, and some Preston businesses certainly delivered to Ashton, residents must have relied initially on shops in town for many goods.⁴³ By the early 1880s another further option existed – John Atkinson was living on and running cab services from Ashton Freehold, and later opened livery stables and carriage hire on Waterloo Road.⁴⁴

Ashton Freehold's location is typical of many middle-class suburbs developed on the edge of Victorian cities. So too was its slow development for building, though this was possibly due more to the individual plans and finances of plot-holders, rather than the speculative housing market often cited. Unlike the earlier failed plans elsewhere on the Tulketh Hall estate, the nature of the land society made slow progress less critical. The stop-start provision of public transport to Ashton seems not to have mattered greatly to the early residents. Many were presumably content to walk, and wealthier owners were able to run or hire carriages. By the reintroduction of horse buses in 1870, there were enough residents on Ashton Freehold to support the service. The introduction of horse trams in 1882 probably encouraged the filling of empty plots over the period of greatest growth in the 1880s.

⁴² *PC*, 26 March 1864; *PH*, 29 April 1865.

⁴³ *PC*, 6 August 1881; 6 February 1869.

⁴⁴ *PH*, 12 July 1882.

Return to Preston in 1880

A key characteristic of Ashton Freehold at its foundation was its separation from Preston – the lower rates, different voting qualification, distance from the urban environment. It is however in many ways its relationship with Preston that defines the estate. As noted above, much shopping must still have been done in town, especially in the early years. For Catholics and non-conformists the nearest churches and chapels were in Preston.

Social links aside, while houses and streets could be built without reference to Preston planning requirements, the infrastructure of the estate was heavily dependent on the town's services. At the first annual general meeting in October 1860, the committee was urged to sort out the water and gas supply. It was February 1861 before Preston Town Council agreed to lay the water mains, but by the following October the estate could celebrate a constant supply from Preston Waterworks.⁴⁵ At that time the Gas Company had not yet begun to lay mains, and it was a year or so before the houses on Ashton Freehold were supplied with gas. Those used to Preston's gas street-lighting had to wait until December 1877 to enjoy it locally. The challenges to the ratepayers of organising this themselves are evident in the months beforehand, and some may have regretted the falling-out with Mr Longworth in 1874. Meetings had to be reconvened for legal reasons and residents appointed to commission the work. Discussions about the additional cost to ratepayers perhaps indicate why the references to Preston's high rates disappear soon after the Freehold was set up.⁴⁶

There had previously been discussions by the ratepayers about establishing a local Board of Health for Ashton. In 1875, the state of the roads, the lack of lighting and the poor or non-existent sewers serving the smaller houses outside the freehold estate seem to have prompted a formal proposal by two Ashton Freehold residents. Henry Davies argued for 'some sort of government' being necessary, again perhaps reflecting

⁴⁵ *PC*, 9 February 1861.

⁴⁶ *PC*, 8 September 1877.

the uncertainty around the management of the estate since the society's inconclusive ending.⁴⁷ No board was established and in 1879, Preston Corporation applied to Parliament for an improvement act which included the expansion of the borough boundaries into Ashton, Fulwood and Ribbleton. The meeting of the Ashton ratepayers in November that year focused on calculations of the likely increase in rates and the possibility of negotiating an initial discount. The tone of the meeting was however of general acceptance and the assumption that they could do nothing to change the likelihood of annexation.⁴⁸

In 1880, 'urban Ashton' – the freehold estate and terraced houses around Tulketh Hall, together with a significant area of farmland to the north and west that was presumably expected to be developed in due course – became part of Preston borough under the Preston Improvement Act. Any consequences for Ashton Freehold and its residents seem to have caused little comment. From 1880, Ashton Freehold became unquestionably a suburb of Preston and its governance was no longer contested or confused. It remained, however, on the outskirts of the urban area until well into the twentieth century. Urban Ashton continued to develop as a socially mixed community, with houses of all types gradually extending the urban area. The building of the dock and its opening in 1892 brought more industrial surroundings, but does not appear to have changed perceptions of Ashton as a place for middle-class residents.

Conclusion

The 1862 Guild guidebook described Ashton Freehold's 'well formed streets', 'nicely arranged' gardens and 'villa residences', suggesting it promised 'ere long to form a well-arranged little town of itself'.⁴⁹ This autonomy did not last, and Ashton Freehold's independence from Preston was only ever partial. Within a generation it was part of

⁴⁷ *PH*, 3 November 1875; *PC*, 6 November 1875.

⁴⁸ *PC*, 8 November 1879. Fulwood, which did create its own Board, successfully argued to remain outside the borough until 1974.

⁴⁹ Clarkson and Dearden, *Guild Guide* (1862).

Preston, absorbed into the Maudland ward, so without even a separate identity in local government. Like similar freehold land societies, however, it had a significant impact on Preston's urban morphology and although the history of its origins has been largely lost, it retains a separate physical character, visible both on maps and on the ground.⁵⁰ It forms the greater part of Ashton Conservation Area and estate agents now refer to it as 'Old Ashton'.

Ashton Freehold's socio-economic character suggests the estate attracted a diversity of residents, most of whom were or aspired to middle-class status, and many of whose roots were in Preston. Whether it did provide the first impetus for Bristow's shopkeepers to abandon the town centre cannot be proven. There is however no other candidate for such a socially diverse new suburb, including aspirant shopkeepers and tradesmen, at this formative time in Preston's history.



Fig 4.2 Waterloo Road in 2023. The original cluster of five houses seen in Fig 1.4, showing (right to left) Guild Cottage, Highfield Place, Bright Place – now Heatherfield, and Ivy Cottage.

⁵⁰ R Dennis, *English Industrial Cities of the Nineteenth Century: a Social Geography* (Cambridge University Press, 1984) p180.

Conclusion

Ashton Freehold Land Society was just one of hundreds of such societies established in the mid-Victorian period. Emerging over a decade after the earliest, it did not share in the passion at the start of the movement and its evangelising promotion by James Taylor. Nor however does it belong to the essentially commercial societies that sprang up once the potential to acquire cheap building land was spotted. Its promoters were from no particular political or religious affiliation, nor did they appear to belong to a single group, class or interest. Its members were similarly diverse, although many came from the social grade that was neither working-class nor entirely middle-class, perhaps best described as aspirational. Many came from families that were working-class a generation earlier, and had seized the new opportunities offered by office work and the new professions. The houses built on the Ashton Freehold estate ranged from rows of terraced houses to detached villas on large plots, although they had gardens in common, unlike most houses in Preston from where the society sprang.

In these contradictions, Ashton Freehold was both typical and atypical of the freehold land society movement. While the prevailing narrative not unreasonably connects the movement to Liberal politics, non-conformist religion, temperance and working-class self-help, at the same time there are examples that counter this – Conservative societies, middle-class estates, publican members. Arguably, the history of Ashton Freehold embodies within one society many of the different facets of the movement, in its management, its members and its suburban impact. There are, however, insufficient studies of freehold land societies taking this multifaceted and longitudinal approach to know whether Ashton Freehold was markedly different within the movement, or merely one more example of its general diversity.

The two phases identified by Chase in the development of the freehold land movement – the small, idealistic amateur societies followed by more commercial ones – are manifest in the changes over Ashton Freehold's first few years. As Beggs warned, the seemingly disparate group of men who established the society were ill-prepared for the complexities of managing such an enterprise and its financial and legislative

challenges. The advent of Longworth almost certainly saved the society from the mixed results of many others, but was apparently driven by his own business interests. He introduced the changes that set the estate on a different course from its architecturally mixed beginnings, creating a streetscape that combined the terraced houses of the more working-class societies with the villas of the wealthier ones. This distinctive character is the result of its origins in a freehold land society.

Similarly, the diversity of the owners and residents results from the estate's origins. The freehold land society movement, long perceived as primarily working-class, is now recognised as encompassing both working-class and middle-class interests. Ashton Freehold brought together people who had benefited from the new opportunities of industrial growth to establish themselves professionally or financially, and consequently socially. Their investment in owning or living on Ashton Freehold was part of that social identity. The freehold land societies – along with other building societies – were instrumental in creating opportunities for aspiring working class families to become homeowners as well as converting the middle classes to homeownership.¹ Ashton Freehold brought those two interests together, so that its more mixed origins were obscured by these social changes.

The estates built by the societies were often slightly detached from their associated towns and contributed to their suburban expansion. Simply to move to Ashton Freehold was to be a pioneer, stepping over the town boundary into what was not yet a suburb. It was unlikely that Ashton Freehold would have become a 'little town of itself' as suggested in 1862, but it did make a distinctive contribution to Preston's suburban development. Not only does it seem to have encouraged the town's shopkeepers and others to move for the first time out of the centre to homes on the outskirts, but it also made a lasting topographical impact. The grid street pattern and the garden plots still stand out on maps of Preston, supporting the argument that the freehold land society movement was a forerunner of the garden suburbs.²

¹ Chase, 'Out of Radicalism' (1991) pp342-4.

² Smith, *Freeholders' Home Estate* (2012) p1.

Something of the idealism of the garden suburb movement is apparent in Ashton Freehold, which does not seem to have attracted the exclusively speculative investors of some more commercial societies. Those who were landlords and owners of several plots were often also personally invested in the estate. Many were residents, but even those who built to rent had family interests at heart, like Joseph Shaw, or proudly attached their initials to their houses, like Samuel Wilson.

The distinctive character of Ashton Freehold – both its buildings and its residents – resulted from its freehold land society origins. This study of an individual, transient freehold land society in Lancashire is a contribution to the largely overlooked history of that movement, especially in the suburban development of towns, rather than the cities. Like the movement as a whole, Ashton Freehold Land Society had a small but significant influence on social mobility and the suburban morphology. Its history was previously largely unknown, and the limitations of time and space mean that much research has only been touched on, while other areas remain to be investigated in depth. It is hoped that the deliberately wide-ranging approach will encourage further research into the range of topics raised and type of sources used, which, though fragmentary, have much to offer histories of such areas nationally. It would be gratifying if this work were part of a revived interest in suburban histories and their longitudinal impact on topography, social mobility and cohesion, and local character.

Was Preston unusual in promoting new freehold land societies after their heyday, or are there other examples to be found? Pending answers to this wider question, just a few of the areas of interest to pursue are the social evolution of Ashton Freehold in the late-Victorian period, a detailed study of the variety of houses and their relationship to its social character, and a thorough comparative study of Preston's freehold land societies. The role of religion and the building of places of worship, the later political affiliations of Ashton residents, and a deeper survey of the networks and socio-economic roots of the estate also offer promising lines of enquiry. More tangential topics have also arisen, such as the development of Preston's electric supply revealed by obscure metal posts on Ashton's streets, and the history of brickmaking, in particular the Board of Health's Ashton brickworks. Finally, to return to the start of this

narrative, what can the development of this Victorian suburban community tell us about the new communities being established further to the north-west of Preston?

This research has cast new light on existing assumptions in Preston and Ashton's history, and not only its freehold land societies. The early history of 'bus transport to Ashton had been previously overlooked, and misapprehensions about land ownership in the area have also been clarified, as well as the pattern and timescale of development. The current Conservation Area appraisal is consequently in need of revision. Perhaps most importantly, a light has also been shone on the people who were neither prominent in Preston's mid-Victorian history, nor part of the undistinguished mass of millworkers, but who, in all their diversity, made the brave, aspirational, and sometimes challenging investment in Ashton Freehold.

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