

## THE SMALL-HOLDINGS SETTLEMENT

### BOXTED, ESSEX

General Booth and his Officers are, as I know from various conversations with them, firmly convinced that many of the great and patent evils of our civilization result from the desertion of the land by its inhabitants, and that crowding into cities which is one of the most marked phenomena of our time. Indeed, it was an identity of view upon this point, which is one that I have advanced for years, that first brought me into contact with the Salvation Army. But to preach the advantages of bringing people back to the land is one thing, and to get them there quite another. Many obstacles stand in the way. I need only mention two of these: the necessity for large capital and the still more important necessity of enabling those who are settled on it to earn out of Mother Earth a sufficient living for themselves and their families.

That well-known philanthropist, the late Mr. Herring, was another person much impressed with the importance of this matter, and I remember about five years ago dining with him, with General Booth as my fellow-guest, on an occasion when all this subject was gone into in detail. So lively, indeed, was Mr. Herring's interest that he offered to advance a sum of £100,000 to the Army, to be used in an experiment

of land-settlement, carried out under its auspices. Should that experiment prove successful, the capital repaid by the tenants was to go to King Edward's Hospital Fund, and should it fail, that capital was to be written off. Of this £100,000, £40,000 has now been invested in the Boxted venture, and if this succeeds, I understand that the balance will become available for other ventures under the provisions of Mr. Herring's will. A long while must elapse, however, before the result of the experiment can be definitely ascertained.

The Boxted Settlement is situated In North Essex, about three miles from Colchester, and covers an area of 400 acres. It is a flat place, that before the Enclosures Acts was a heath, with good road frontages throughout, an important point where small-holdings are concerned. The soil is a medium loam over gravel, neither very good nor very bad, so far as my judgment goes, and of course capable of great improvement under intensive culture.

This estate, which altogether cost about £20 per acre to buy, has been divided into sixty-seven holdings, varying in size from 4-1/2 acres to 7 acres. The cottages which stand upon the holdings have been built in pairs, at a cost of about £380 per pair, which price includes drainage, a drinking well, and, I think, a soft-water cistern. These are extremely good dwellings, and I was much struck with their substantial and practical character. They comprise three bedrooms, a large living-room, a parlour, and a scullery, containing a sink and a bath. Also there is a tool-house, a pigstye, and a movable

fowl-house on wheels.

On each holding an orchard of fruit trees has been planted in readiness for the tenant, also strawberries, currants, gooseberries, and raspberries, which in all occupy about three-quarters of an acre. The plan is that the rest of the holding should be cultivated intensively upon a system that is estimated to return £20 per acre.

The arrangement between the Army and its settlers is briefly as follows: In every case the tenant begins without any capital, and is provided with seeds and manures to carry him through the first two years, also with a living allowance at the rate of 10s. a week for the man and his wife, and 1s. a week for each child, which allowance is to cease after he has marketed his first crops.

The tenancy terms are, that for two years the settler is a tenant at will, the agreement being terminable by either party at any time without compensation. At the end of these two years, subject to the approval of the Director of the Settlement, the settler can take a 999 years' lease of his holding, the Army for obvious reasons retaining the freehold. After the first year of this lease, the rental payable for forty years is to be 5 per cent per annum upon the capital invested in the settlement of the man and his family upon the holding, which rent is to include the cost of the house, land, and improvements, and all moneys advanced to him during his period of probation.

It is estimated that this capital sum will average £520 per holding, so that the tenant's annual rent for forty years will be £26, after which he will have nothing more to pay save a nominal rent, and the remainder of the lease will be the property of himself, or rather, of his descendants. This property, I presume, will be saleable.

So, putting aside all legal technicalities and complications, it comes to this: the tenant is started for two years after which he pays about £4 a year rent per acre for the next forty years, and thereby virtually purchases his holding. The whole question, which time alone can answer, is whether a man can earn £4 per acre rent per annum, and, in addition, provide a living for himself and family out of a five-acre holding on medium land near Colchester.

The problem is one upon which I cannot venture to express any decisive opinion, even after many years of experience of such matters. I trust, however, that the answer may prove to be in the affirmative, and I am quite sure that if any Organization is able to cause it to work out this way, that Organization is the Salvation Army, whose brilliant business capacity can, as I know, make a commercial success of the most unpromising materials.

I should like to point out that this venture is one of great and almost of national importance, because if it fails then it will be practically proved that it is impossible to establish small holders on

the land by artificial means, at any rate, in England, and at the present prices of agricultural produce. It is not often that a sum of £40,000 will be available for such a purpose, and with it the direction of a charitable Organization that seeks no profit, the oversight of an Officer as skilled and experienced as Lieut.-Colonel Hiffe, and, in addition, a trained Superintendent who will afford advice as to all agricultural matters, a co-operative society ready to hire out implements, horses and carts at cost price, and, if so desired, to undertake the distribution or marketing of produce. Still, notwithstanding all these advantages, I have my misgivings as to the ultimate result.

The men chosen to occupy these holdings by a Selection Committee of Salvation Army Officers, are for the most part married people who were born in the country, but had migrated to the towns. Most of them have more or less kept themselves in touch with country life by cultivating allotments during their period of urban residence, and precedence has been given to those who have shown a real desire to return to the land. Other essentials are a good character, both personal and as a worker, bodily and mental health, and total abstention from any form of alcohol. No creed test is required, and there are men of various religious faiths upon the Settlement, only a proportion of them being Salvationists.

I interviewed two of these settlers at hazard upon their holdings, and, although the year had been adverse, found them happy and hopeful.

No. 1, who had been a mechanic, proposed to increase his earnings by mending bicycles. No. 2 was an agriculturist pure and simple, and showed me his fowls and pigs with pride. Here, however, I found a little rift within the rural lute, for on asking him how his wife liked the life he replied after a little hesitation, 'Not very well, sir: you see, she has been accustomed to a town.'

If she continues not to like it 'very well,' there will, I think, be an end to that man's prospects as a small holder.

I had the pleasure of bring present in July, 1910, at the formal opening of the Boxted Settlement, when the Salvation Army entertained several hundred guests to luncheon, many of them very well-known people. The day for a wonder was fine, General Booth spoke for over an hour in his most characteristic and interesting way; the Chairman, Earl Carrington, President of the Board of Agriculture, blessed the undertaking officially and privately; everybody seemed pleased with the holdings, and, in short, all went merrily as a marriage bell.

As I sat and listened, however, the query that arose in my mind was--What would be the state of these holdings and of the tenants or of their descendants on, say, that day thirty years? I trust and hope that it will be a good state in both instances; but I must confess to certain doubts and fears.

In this parish of Ditchingham, where I live, there is a man with a few

acres of land, an orchard, a greenhouse, etc. That man works his little tenancy, deals in the surplus produce of large gardens, which he peddles out in the neighbouring town, and, on an average, takes piecework on my farm (at the moment of writing he and his son are hoeing mangolds) for two or three days a week; at any rate, for a great part of the year. He is a type of what I may call the natural small holder, and I believe does fairly well. The question is, can the artificially created small holder, who must pay a rent of £4 the acre, attain to a like result?

Again, I say I hope so most sincerely, for if not in England 'back to the land' will prove but an empty catchword. At any rate, the country should be most grateful to the late Mr. Herring, who provided the funds for this intensely interesting experiment, and to the Salvation Army which is carrying it out in the interests of the landless poor.