

The land IS ours!

by Nicholas Dennys

IT WAS HARD to feel a subversive in the Fleet motorway service station. We stood in the car park apparently waiting for the first drumbeat in a new revolution.

All around mothers, husbands and their children made their way to and from the fast food counters. Saabs and Volvos and Fords meandered their way around us. But we were noticeably different. Several of us were wildly dressed with dreadlocks and others were bristling with cameras. Also there was no mistaking the traffic cop sitting quietly on his motorbike, a stone's throw away, eying us for an hour. When word of our destination - the disused airport at Wisley, in Surrey, where the A3 crosses the M25 - finally came over our organiser's mobile phone, he swept off in smooth pursuit of the first vehicles to leave.

It was St. George's day, April 23, and the prime target of the action was St. George's Hill, although at the last minute for security and practical reasons Wisley, which was within walking distance from it, was chosen instead. But St. George's Hill was the symbol for the event, for it was here in 1649 that Gerard Winstanley and the Diggers started their action against the enclosures which had so harried the English people for 150 years. "The fair fields full of folk" as Langland put it were converted into fields full of sheep. The dispossessed and the political and religious movements among them were a major source of popular support in the Civil War for Parliamentarians, who

later betrayed them and hastened the enclosures.

The mass trespass at Wisley was a considerable logistical achievement. To get 300 people to set up camp in a muddy dell in the middle of nowhere takes some pull. The location, one of six possible sites, was decided at the last moment by only three of the organisers to ensure that word did not leak to the police. A complex route crossing six main roads was used by the main group leaving the Cooltan Centre in Brixton, London. This ensured that road blocks could not be set up. Throughout their journey they were tracked by a police helicopter. They also intercepted police communications and maintained contact between their various vehicles and our second group in the Fleet service station. Once they reached the site they ensured that the police and the landlord were informed, and they were armed with leaflets explaining their actions to local people. Legal advisers were on hand and everyone was issued with yellow leaflets explaining what to do if arrested. Their publicity work was so effective that journalists and other observers, such as myself, seemed to swarm about them at the site.

On arrival, coppicing took place, and the staves were used in interesting geodesic designs to build communal structures for meeting, cooking and a theatre. A leaflet advertised "Music, Circus, Storytelling, Sculpture, Tree Dressing, Land and Media workshops, Land Cultivation". These things did indeed

happen on the site.

THIS WAS THE first direct action AVOWEDLY on the land issue for a very long time, and some of its organisers were advocates of public revenue from land value.

Its main purpose was to protest against the exclusion of people from land and against the Criminal Justice Act, which gives increased powers to police, other authorities and landowners to exclude people from land. The Act is being and can be invoked against travellers and gypsies, road protesters, environmental activists, organisers of spontaneous events, festivals, ramblers and any others who act out the belief that the land belongs to no one and is, as Gerard Winstanley put it and as Henry George might have done, "a Common Treasury for all".

Most of us have learnt to live on the precarious ledges of ground that the exclusionary system of land ownership allots us. These people have not. And on their continued determination to make free of what nature freely gave depends a little hope for many more than themselves. As the organiser's leaflet "The Land is Ours" puts it, "Today just a tiny handful of landowners and developers decide how the land is employed. As a result development takes place not for our benefit but for theirs. Our common spaces are given over to office blocks, car parks, roads and superstores. Housing land is used for executive mansions rather than homes for the homeless. Farmland is treated

as a factory floor, from which landscape features and wildlife habitats are erased. We have, in other words, been dispossessed from our inheritance."

Some aims of the Land is Ours movement are -

- A universal right of access to uncultivated rural land
- The restitution of common spaces in towns
- Increased control over development by local people
- A public registry of land ownership, leading to the introduction of community ground rents.

ONCE LIFE settled down at the site, contrasts began to appear. Many of those involved had very different agendas. Some spoke of their desire to drop out of regular society. Others of dropping in to a playful alternative of their own creation. Others were clearly there for political reasons: opposition to the Criminal Justice Act, or support for the Land issue - such people are the opposite of those dropping out, for to seek change is to remain engaged. Some were environmentalists, tree and road protesters. People of like mind melded in and out of this mix throughout the week.

But there were also visitors from

another world who did not mix easily. Several journalists looked rather bewildered. One young cameraman turned up with a very beautiful companion to interview and film. But after a while he could be seen wandering about asking rather anxiously if anyone had seen his colleague.

There was a considerable culture gap and age gap between some of the visitors and the encamped, and it seemed, given the purpose was publicity for a symbolic event, that too little thought had been given to integrate visitors as quickly as possible. A small lodge was set up housing many pamphlets and saying on a bold sign "RECEPTION". But no one ever manned it, and having set up a Georgist bookstall beside it, I found myself attempting to help lost journalists identify people whom I did not know myself!

IT WAS OBSCURE why a rural site had been chosen. In Wynstanley's time the countryside swarmed with thousands of dispossessed homeless, for the majority of people worked in agriculture. Today about 2% do. It is the places where people work and live today that they suffer the threat of exclusion which must be bought off with rent and dependency and all that

flows from it. It is also exclusion from land value - not area - that destroys most lives today.

An appropriate direct action would be a rent withholding, or occupation of buildings held out of use for purpose of land speculation. Entry into exclusive places. Setting up small scale work or markets on unused space and using the rent for collective benefit.

It was fun to be there in a little English glade, an instant village of social adventure, but for me this was a fragile contrast with the historical and continuing fact of bloodshed and shattered urban and rural lives around the world and in this country (though here the welfare state exchanges dependency for pain).

To this variegated group Ron Banks of the Land Policy Council had been invited to speak. It was a tricky task that did not go well. Such a group had few fundamentals in common. A philosophy of society is a little difficult to maintain to people, some of whom think they neither need nor want one, or who believe that no government is best. Even Georgism needs a minimal state. Nor were the audience kind to a man two generations away who did not know to say "people" instead of "mankind" and "nature given" instead of "God given". He also made the error of persuading them to sing the "land song". His audience were anti-militarists. If you look too closely at it, the "land song" is a mindless militaristic ditty.

More seriously, there was a lesson for Georgists in this reception which I should have anticipated. Many of us have got so used to speaking to ourselves in an uncontested debate that we think we know what is important about land. Although one might not agree, there were plenty of people there familiar with the issues and some who had experienced the harshest forms of landlessness. This was the first direct action on the land issue for decades with a media coverage. We would do better to do more listening than instructing on such occasions.

PLAY seemed sometimes to conflict with political meaning. There was a wonderful moment of natural democracy at the beginning of the land occupation when those who had wished to camp on St. George's Hill in memory of the Diggers expressed their anger at the change of camp site.

The cry went up "Meeting! Meeting!" and suddenly 200 people gathered naturally into a neat circle and views were forcefully exchanged and the organisers criticised for being too tame. For a moment it looked as if the whole camp was going to uproot and go to St. George's Hill.

Clearly anyone could take part who wished, and speaking was not difficult. It worked smoothly. Even the police were invited to give their view as to whether the group should go - the senior police officer wittily declined to take the responsibility. It was decided a march should be made and banners should be carried. But those who wished to make a political statement found themselves up against the creative banner painters who had such fund and took so long about it that rude words flee too and fro and the light was almost lost. The words on the banners were a little lost, too, as children and dogs with painted hands and muddied feet made their own statements across the lettering.