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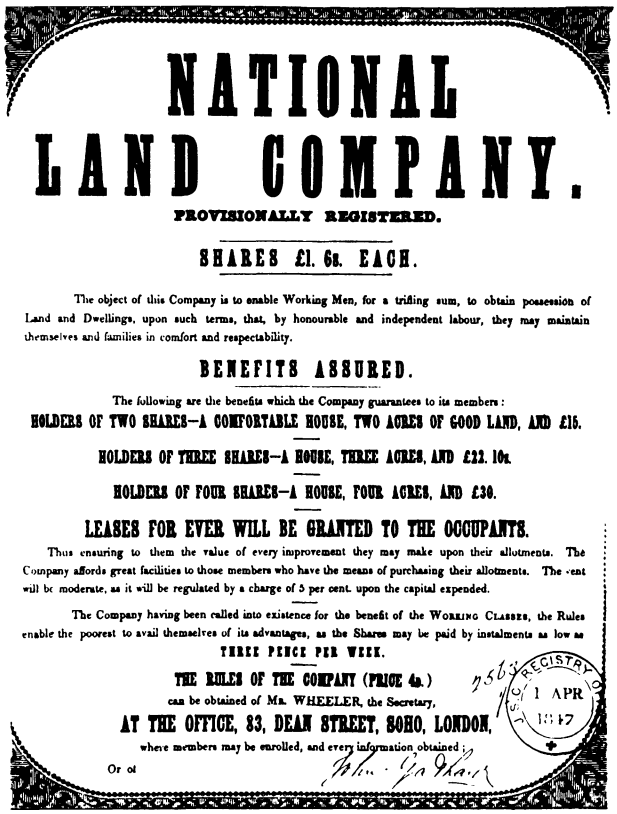
CHARTERVILLE AND THE LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL REFORM

Concern about the desperate living conditions of industrial workers in Britain peaked in the 1830s and 1840s with a severe economic depression and unprecedented housing shortages.[1] Politicians, authors, and architects, among others, used legislation, fiction, and buildings to illustrate viable alternatives to industrial capitalism. Their method was to compile evidence on social evils and then to suggest reform through an often radical reordering of the human and physical landscape. Embedded within this Victorian social manifesto were numerous plans for utopian communities that offered a critique of existing conditions while at the same time proposing alternatives in comprehensible terms. The town of Charterville, located in Oxfordshire, England, was one such community, the product of Feargus O'Connor's Chartist Land Plan of 1842. The relict landscape of Charterville remains today as an important reminder of the difficulty of reconciling political intentions with the design of the cultural landscape.

Charterville was established in 1848 as the third of five Chartist settlements.[2] It consisted of a school and seventy-eight small stone cottages constructed on individual lots of four acres or less along a major road from Minster Lovell to Brize Norton.[3] The basic objective of the Chartist Land Plan was to give working-class people access to land on which they could live and grow their own food. Because political power was still tied to landownership, it also enabled them to vote. The plan was intended to reduce unemployment in the overcrowded cities and at the same time offer a viable alternative to industrial capitalism.

Charterville and the other four Chartist estates were made possible through the establishment of the National Land Company. As described in a handbill of 1847 (Fig. 1), the plan was for subscribers, mostly factory workers from industrial centers, to pay weekly dues toward the purchase of land being obtained by Feargus O'Connor, the charismatic Irish leader of the movement. As the handbill promised, the benefits, distributed by lottery, included "good land," a "comfortable house," and a sum of money. A pile of manure was also supplied at the gate to each property; individual leases were for life.[4]

But Chartism entailed much more than the Land Plan. As historian Dorothy Thompson has illustrated, it suggested an entire alternative culture. Between 1838 and 1848 working people from all over Britain joined forces to end the exploitation of wage laborers by industrialists and to extend voting rights to England's nonlandowning working class. It was one of the largest mass movements in modern history, with more followers than many of the groups that overthrew other European governments in 1848.[5] The People's Charter of 1838, from which the movement drew its name, established the official Chartist program. The group sought universal male suffrage, the aboli-



NATIONAL
LAND COMPANY.

PROVISIONALLY REGISTERED.

SHARES £1. 6s. EACH.

The object of this Company is to enable Working Men, for a trifling sum, to obtain possession of Land and Dwellings, upon such terms, that, by honourable and independent labour, they may maintain themselves and families in comfort and respectability.

BENEFITS ASSURED.

The following are the benefits which the Company guarantees to its members:

HOLDERS OF TWO SHARES—A COMFORTABLE HOUSE, TWO ACRES OF GOOD LAND, AND £15.

HOLDERS OF THREE SHARES—A HOUSE, THREE ACRES, AND £22. 10s.

HOLDERS OF FOUR SHARES—A HOUSE, FOUR ACRES, AND £30.

LEASES FOR EVER WILL BE GRANTED TO THE OCCUPANTS.

Thus ensuring to them the value of every improvement they may make upon their allotments. The Company affords great facilities to those members who have the means of purchasing their allotments. The rent will be moderate, as it will be regulated by a charge of 5 per cent. upon the capital expended.

The Company having been called into existence for the benefit of the WORKING CLASSES, the Rules enable the poorest to avail themselves of its advantages, as the Shares may be paid by instalments as low as

THREE PENCE PER WEEK.

THE RULES OF THE COMPANY (PRICE 4d.)
can be obtained of MR. WHEELER, the Secretary,
AT THE OFFICE, 83, DEAN STREET, SOHO, LONDON,
where members may be enrolled, and every information obtained;

Or of

REGISTRY 1 APR 1847

Fig. 1. Handbill issued by the National Land Company in 1847. (Courtesy *Oxoniensia* and Kate Tiller)

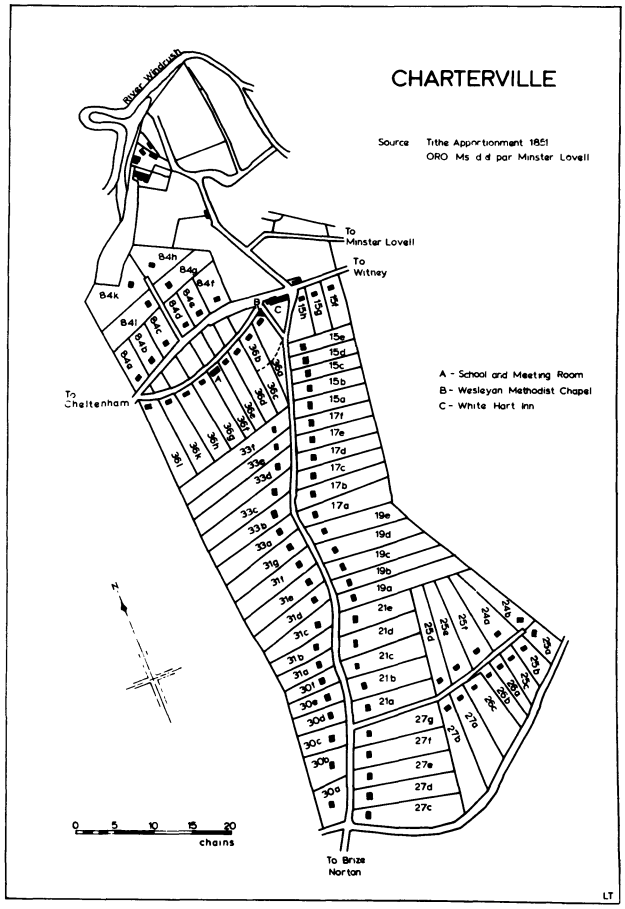


Fig. 2. Site plan of Charterville as it existed in 1851. (Courtesy *Oxoniensia* and Kate Tiller)

tion of property qualifications for members of Parliament, the payment of members, equal electoral districts, and annual parliaments. At the heart of Chartism lay the belief that access to political power provided the only chance to reform industrial society.

Although the political platform of Chartism appears radical, the architectural manifestations of the Land Plan at Charterville were surprisingly conservative, reflecting an idyllic image of rural life and glorifying the individual. Productive labor occupied a central place in the plan of the Chartist cottage, but the site planning and exterior design of the buildings recalled times when workers enjoyed little power. The architecture of Charterville reveals conservative aspects of Chartism that illustrate, perhaps more clearly than other documents, the inevitable failure of the movement.

O'Connor purchased three hundred acres of land near Witney in June 1847 at a cost of more than ten thousand pounds sterling.[6] The choice of site was unfortunate; there was no rail connection or nearby market, and the soil was poor. In addition, the land was on high terrain, making water difficult to obtain. Three wells supplied the entire estate. As historian Kate Tiller has said, "Just as the Chartists believed in access to the land as a God-given right, so their water-supply appropriately came direct[ly] from heaven."[7]

The plan of Charterville (Fig. 2) was laid out by O'Connor and company director Christopher

Doyle.[8] They located most of the cottages along the main road from Minster Lovell to Brize Norton; similar lots were defined on two minor, perpendicular streets. The school and eighteen houses were located on Upper Crescent, in the north, while Bushey Ground on the south was a cul-de-sac. Charterville was immediately popular despite the problems of isolation, limited land, and poor farming conditions. Workers inhabited the cottages within fourteen months.[9]

In the design of Charterville, O'Connor postulated a return to a completely agrarian society. He intended tenants to raise their own food and provided no facilities for trade or communal labor. O'Connor warned in his book, *A Practical Work on the Management of Small Farms,* of the "ignorant landlords . . . induced by as ignorant writers to adopt the large farm system." He insisted that two hundred acres farmed by one man would never be as productive as fifty men working on plots of four acres each because of the distances involved in carrying manure and drawing produce.[10] There was much debate over whether four acres could support a family, particularly as many of the inhabitants had no previous farming experience.[11]

A diagram of a Charterville cottage published by O'Connor in 1847 shows a three-room house with a row of service spaces in the rear (Fig. 3). A courtyard behind the main block of the house was surrounded by outbuildings for animals and storage. The plan presented clear functional zoning: three main living spaces faced the street, less polite domestic labor took place behind this zone, and the back of the building housed large-scale agricultural labor. In the front, the large, central kitchen stepped out from the main block of the house. The flanking rooms, intended as bedroom and sitting room, were accorded secondary positions but were equal relative to the kitchen. Paneled doors separated these three interconnected rooms, each with its own fireplace. Entry to the house was directly into the kitchen without a vestibule space or porch.[12] Like Henry Glassie's kitchens of Ballymenone, the kitchens of Charterville were public

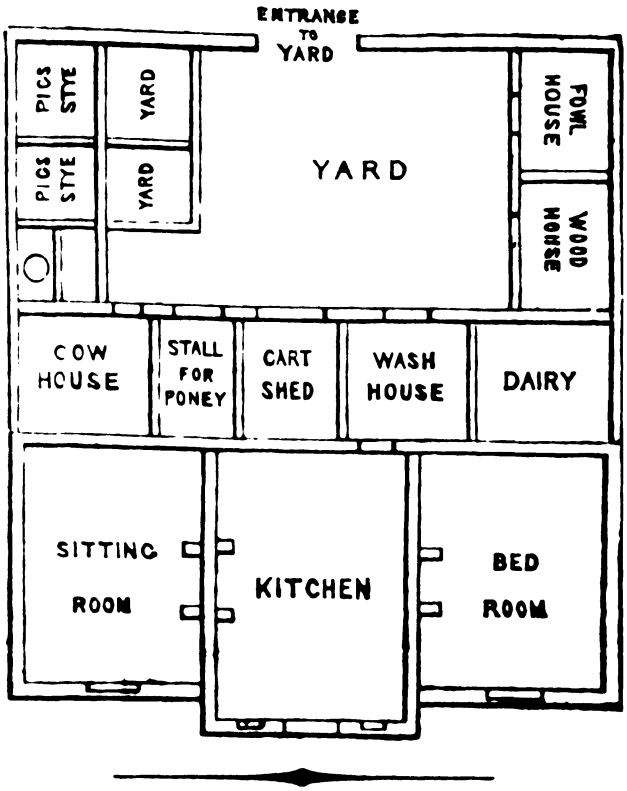


Fig. 3. O'Connor's plan for a cottage, published in *Northern Star,* February 13, 1847. (Courtesy Leeds University Library)

places—"vulnerable, open, and occupied."[13]

The prominent position of the kitchen in the cottage plan was consistent with the Chartist emphasis on self-sufficient productive labor. In *What May Be Done with Three Acres of Land,* O'Connor had promised a weekly yield of 14 pounds of bacon, 1.5 stones of flour, 4.5 stones of potatoes, 20 duck eggs, 2 pounds of honey, and a further income of 44 pounds sterling "after a consumption and the best of good living."[14] He believed that this could be achieved with 157 days' labor. The large Chartist kitchen became the space where tenants processed the fruits of the land and presumably realized the joys of family life and labor.

The builder of the Chartist cottage supplied the kitchen with a store-cupboard, range, and dresser,

intending the space for more than cooking and eating.[15] Larger than the sitting room, the Chartist kitchen probably acted as the primary space for family interaction and for entertaining visitors. Access to other parts of the household came only through the kitchen, and thus the space served as a central circulation area mediating between private and public spaces, much like the central passage in other house forms.

In these ways the plan of the Chartist kitchen was in keeping with the backward-looking political and social agendas of the Land Plan.[16] The Chartists equated power with access to the land; they guaranteed happy family life through self-sufficiency and attempted to transfer the control of time from the factory to the home. The kitchen's prominent position, relative size, and accessibility to the yard and the land celebrated these values in architectural terms.

However, this aspect of the cottages was unintelligible from the exterior; the elevation of the Chartist cottage obscured the message of the plan and in the process revealed one of the central contradictions of O'Connor's politics. In plan the stepping out of the central kitchen had served several purposes. It made the kitchen larger than the adjacent rooms and thus marked the prominence of the space in the life of the settlement. As the center of activity in the house, closely connected to public space, the kitchen recalled the hall of medieval houses and was therefore consistent with the nostalgic ideology of the Land Plan. When considered in elevation, however, the Chartist kitchen, roofed by a projecting gable, translated into a classical temple front. The smoothly rendered quoins emphasized the jut, and a small roof ventilator decorated the pediment. The Chartist cottage, from the street, was a tiny Palladian villa (Fig. 4).

The potential of architectural features such as these to express, rather than to deny, the functions within a farmhouse had been highly developed and publicized by John Claudius Loudon by this time. In his *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture* of 1833, Loudon had presented the designs for many rural houses employing classical language, but in his houses the style was used as a way of expressing the plan on the exterior. As George Hersey has explained, Loudon saw the house as a kind of "informational appliance," and he matched specific meanings to elements of buildings, suggesting that windows, doors, chimneys, and porches acted as "signifiers," communicating messages about a building's interior layout.[17] In the *Encyclopaedia* he illustrated houses in which portions were shifted forward to express the locations of major rooms, while the position of the porch, he claimed, revealed the place of the hall. In Loudon's terms the Chartist cottage was unfit and dishonest, using style as a costume.

To begin with, the front elevation of the Chartist cottage refers to a specific classical plan type at odds with the layout of the rooms. The three-part division of the facade and symmetrical placement of the windows are those of a Georgian central-hall house with flanking living spaces. The absence of a mediating porch or vestibule adds to the expectation that the space marked by the projecting gable is a hall or passageway. The central chimney rising from the kitchen further confuses the reading of the space; it just barely peaks over the

Fig. 4. The Chartist Cottage, from the street, seemed to be a miniature Palladian villa.

ridge of the main roof and is no more prominent than the end chimneys. Loudon would have insisted that the kitchen chimney be more robust, more decorated, and much taller than the less important end chimneys; he also would have differentiated the sitting room windows from those of the bedroom. Different room functions required different signifiers in elevation; conversely, irregular openings should represent irregularities in floor plan. Such expression, for Loudon, was the function of a building's elevation.

Apart from this "dishonest" use of classical elements in the elevation as a way of disguising the working life glorified in the plan, the classicism at Charterville also connected the cottage to a tradition that, at first glance, might seem in direct opposition to the larger sphere of Victorian social reform (Fig. 5). During the eighteenth century, the classicism of Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio had been embraced by English architects in their designs for large country estates as a way of marking man's domination of the landscape; it was a mode associated exclusively with the Whig aristocracy and was popularized by conservative, well-educated architects and patrons, notably William Kent and Lord Burlington. Palladianism stood for a book-learned awareness of current fashion, and architects readily adopted it for the design of ostentatious country villas. Although neoclassicism has, at times, been appropriated to express the relatively independent status of gentlemen-farmers, this form of classicism was more often used for the houses of those who directed laborers than for the houses of the workers themselves.[18]

Palladianism was inconsistent with the larger objectives of social reform in its glorification of the individual, its domination of the landscape, and its clear reliance on historic precedent. The style succinctly expressed, however, the conservative aspects of O'Connor's Land Plan. Its adoption in the Chartist cottage was intended to assert the landowning status and consequent political power of the tenants by association with the great country estates. Without challenging the existing rule of landownership, O'Connor's Land Plan simply provided a way for working people to support the status quo. Modest Palladian villas on individual lots were the architectural expression of this conservatism.

The site plan of Charterville was an even more potent material statement of this conservative ideology. Inefficient in both labor and materials, the dispersed arrangement of the estate, the generous setback of the cottages from the street, and the clear marking of territory by fences and gates glorified the individual tenant rather than the cohesion of the movement as a whole and pointed to the contradictions in O'Connor's position on private property. Because the vote was still tied to the land, O'Connor saw the occupation of individual lots as critical to the intentions of Chartism. This was a divisive issue within the movement.[19] Marx and

Fig. 5. Marble Hill House, built in 1724–1729 for Henrietta Howard, mistress of George II, is a superb example of the Palladian style. (David Brady)

Engels, whom O'Connor met in 1845, believed that the private holding of land prevented major changes in society. O'Connor's commitment to private property, rather than land nationalization, was criticized as "encouraging selfish, narrow views amongst the lucky holders of Land Company plots, benefiting a few but not really getting to the heart of the problem."[20]

Although Chartism was a mass rebellion and its Land Plan was based on common ownership, its architecture indicates the extent to which the plan served only individuals. In Charterville there was no church, no market, no town hall, no palace of labor; there were only individual houses. The architecture of the Chartist cottages was not at odds with the ideology of the Land Plan. It revealed the inherently reactionary posture of the vision.

The presentation of Charterville in the press underlined the complex message of its architecture. One view of the settlement published at the time in the popular press deviated from reality in several important ways, revealing how the architecture of the largest radical movement in Britain might have been expected to look from a reform point of view (Fig. 6). To begin with, the focus of the drawing on the school and the houses of Upper Crescent is deceptive. In the drawing the school seems to be the architectural focus of the settlement; individual lots are not differentiated. In essence, the artist depicted a communal settlement where tenants might share large buildings and expanses of land. In addition, the cottages in the drawing are much more attenuated than those actually built; that is, they are Gothic rather than Palladian. The roof pitch is too steep, openings are too vertical, and the quoins have been omitted in most of the cottages. The artist even dared to decorate the windows of one cottage with pointed arches rather than the classical frames actually used in Charterville. All traces of classicism, even the telltale central chimney, were omitted. The drawing was a fiction, but one that by its omissions reveals much truth.

In fact, the artist saw Charterville as a manorial village, as part of the system of land division that had formed the core of the medieval English landscape. Like the Chartist cottages, the main blocks of manorial houses had been set parallel to the street without a mediating porch or entryway. The manorial village was an appropriate model for Charterville in that it had been an agrarian, self-sufficient system. The architecture had an equalizing effect; each family had the same house. But in the manorial system the towering presence of the

Fig. 6. Drawing of Charterville published in *Illustrated London News* 17 (October 12, 1850): 296. (Courtesy of the Illustrated London News Picture Library)

manor house and/or church was a constant architectural reminder of the serfs' limited power in the landscape. The land in the manorial system also played a fundamentally different role than in the politics of Chartism. Small holdings were forfeited in exchange for military protection from the lord. The land provided food and work but absolutely no political power. Like the Palladian references, the resemblance of the site plan to the manorial system recalled an oppressive period for workers. It served to dilute the more radical aspects of the vision and marked the divergence of the conservative and radical roots of Chartism.

Charterville lasted only three years as a Chartist land settlement. When O'Connor attempted to obtain rents from the tenants to alleviate the financial troubles of the company, the tenants refused to pay, insisting that they already owned their land. The classical architecture of their houses, as we have seen, supported their claim. The financial and legal basis of the Land Plan, however, were found unsound by a Parliamentary Select Committee. In 1851 the cottage properties at Charterville were sold.

The changes made to the buildings in their resuscitation as free-market commodities are telling. The plan was changed drastically. A plan of a cottage as used in the 1970s (Fig. 7) shows how the central room, the former Chartist kitchen, became a sitting room—a place of show and tell rather than the center of family production.[21] The kitchen, as we might expect, was reduced in size and moved to the rear of the house. Next to it, in place of the former washhouse, was a formal dining room.

In contrast, the elevations were changed minimally (Fig. 8). The symmetrically placed windows now truthfully expressed the functions within, as both side rooms became bedrooms. Small entry vestibules were added to the fronts of many houses, protecting the private realm within. Several owners added stucco or other surface materials in order to assert their individualism. The projected temple front, the sign of gentility and

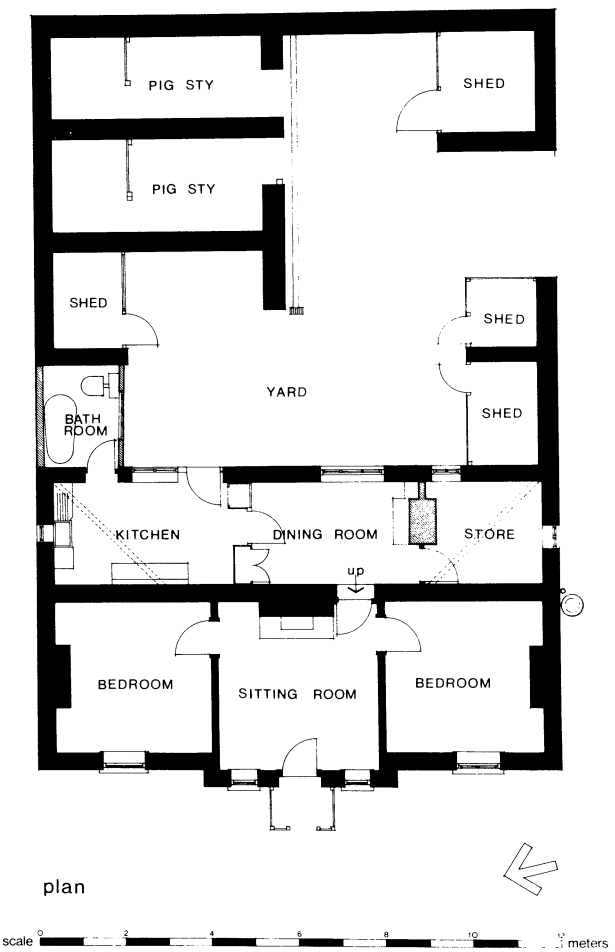


Fig. 7. Plan of 69 Brize Norton Road from the 1970s. (Oxfordshire Museums Service, courtesy Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society)

status, remained intact. The meaning of classicism survived the failure of Chartism unscathed.

The Chartist cottages now sell for 150,000 pounds, the land is not farmed, and new, larger houses awkwardly occupy the narrow spaces between the original plots. The relatively reactionary elevations of the building now truthfully express the equally conservative plan. Charterville is no longer an ambiguous landscape; it speaks clearly of the values against which the Chartists rebelled. The message, however, has come full circle. In O'Connor's time occupation of the landscape was the measure of political power; ownership of a plot

Fig. 8. A Chartist cottage today. Many owners have added entries to their houses, emphasizing their classical forms.

of land ensured a vote. Today every citizen of Great Britain over the age of eighteen can exercise a vote, and it is now the land itself that is inaccessible to working-class people. Even the present-day architecture of Charterville underlines the notion that power and freedom under industrial capitalism entail more than the extension of the franchise.