

Sarratt Local History Society

'The Chartists of Heronsgate' speaker Gill Gowing

How many local people now, glancing at the photos in the estate agents' windows in Chorleywood and seeing houses in Heronsgate advertised for 1 1/2 million pounds or similar sums, know the name Fergus O'Connor, or that the houses in question were originally designed and built for working class families with no vote and no 21st century benefits!

After the French Revolution, there was a Europe-wide movement in the working classes to implement changes in government and so improve their living and working conditions and involve them directly in politics. In Great Britain what became known as the Chartist movement started in the North and Midlands and spread south. Its two leaders were a quiet, 'moderate' Man called William Lovatt and a Protestant Irishman, Fergus O'Connor, M.P. described as a 'Radical, Visionary, Populist' whom we would probably now call 'charismatic'!

The 'Charter' presented to parliament in 1838, but never implemented, demanded:

- votes for ALL men,
- equal constituencies,
- abolition of rule requiring MPs to be property owners,
- salaries for MPs,
- Annual General Elections
- SECRET Ballots

The political movement eventually disintegrated but passionate, red headed Fergus O'C, started a startling, for the time, 'land plan' to erect well-built and designed 'cottages' for working class families. There was a small subscription and a lottery and a Public issue of shares in the 'National Land Company'.

Of the five 'communities' built, Heronsgate was the first, its streets named after the places where the Chartist movement had started. There was a school, but no churches or pubs and each house had a big enough garden for a family to be self-sufficient in vegetables, eggs and possibly, pork.

Sadly the scheme was not properly thought out and O'Connor's ideas were often at odds with the men in power at the time. By 1860 most of the original tenants had left and O'Connor himself turned to drink. Not until 1928 was there universal suffrage for all men and housing for the poor at the end of the 19th Century was abysmal.

How ironic, then, that the visionary estate of Heronsgate, created to provide poor workers with a decent standard of housing, should now be sold, with numerous extensions and 'improvements' as 'highly desirable' residences for the well-off!

The next meeting of the SLHS. will be on *Tuesday 19 November, in the Village School, 7.30 for 8.0pm* The subject of the talk is 'Magic Lanterns: a Touch of Glass'.
Angela Colman