

## Crookes History Booklets

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### The Reform Land Society

Until mid-Victorian times, the voting franchise only applied to "Gentlemen of Property" meaning two things: you had to be a member of the middle or upper classes, and at the minimum, you had to own your own house. The ordinary working man was never represented, and if you rented your house, you didn't could vote at all, even if you had money. This presented the rising middle classes with a problem: how to buy a house, so that they had property, in an age before Building Societies and bank loans for mortgages, because a mortgage was only available to someone who already owned property, and needed a loan, which secured against the property. If you had no property, you had no collateral to loan against. Adding to this difficulty, if you were renting a house, much of your income would go on rent, making it very difficult save up enough to buy even a modest house. Artisans, successful businessmen and middle-ranking professionals found it hard to raise the money to buy a house, so most rented. The Reform Freehold Society sprang up in 1849 as a way of making plots of land available for people to buy for building houses on, therefore giving them the much needed property. How it worked was that a Society was formed, consisting of people who wanted to build their own houses, plus a few who had access to capital. A farm would come onto the market, where all the fields would be sold as one lot. The people with the capital would put their money into the Society, with the expectation that they would get it back with interest. The scheme was run democratically by its members. As a Society, it could buy such large plots of land cheaply, and break them up into smaller lots, to be taken up by the members, but remember they were still just buying land, with no services, or even roads. However, the crucial element was that the member now owned property. They then had to find a way to fund the building of their own house, while still paying rent on the one they were living in. The members could spread their payments and interest over 10-14 years, until the house was built. Each member was responsible for his own building, and many did the job with their own hands. People bought into the Society by paying 72 shillings, then paid £50 for one acre of land, paid off at the rate of 5 shillings a week for 14 years. Once all the loans were paid off, the Society was wound up.

The first version of the Reform Freehold Society started up in Walkley, and old maps indicate that this area was developed quite a few years before Crookes, but it got into difficulty, and was wound up after a few years. However, the model had much merit, and there was an appetite amongst the newly wealthy to move out to healthy Crookes, if they could not afford Broomhill or Fulwood.

The Reform Land Society of Crookes was formed in 1851, with 258 members, and set about buying 41 acres of land, divided into 171 lots. These members all had largish plots, and the houses they built were substantial, big stone villas with imposing gateposts, fine driveways, and most were built

'sideways on' to the road, to take advantage of the views. To fund the build of these houses, they then sold off part of their plot to a speculative builder, who would put up a row of maybe 6 or 8 terrace houses, all of which were for rent by those who could not afford to buy outright, but wanted to live in Crookes. In this way, the gaps between the initial detached houses were filled in.

It wasn't until 1867 that voting rights were extended to all male householders, by which time the Reform Land Society had done its job, and would soon be wound up. We can still see the effects of the Society visible in Crookes today; the fine detached houses are still there, many with the entrance door sideways on to the road, and often they have what would have been a stable and carriage house round the back, as these people would have been wealthy enough to own their own horse. Also look out for the sets of fine granite gate posts, some of which still lead to a substantial detached house, but many of which are 'divorced' from their original house when the land was sold off, meaning the elaborate gateposts lead to an incongruous 1930s semi or a 1970s bungalow!