

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY LANDOWNER AS URBAN DEVELOPER: THE CLIFTON ESTATE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LYTHAM-ST ANNES

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The Cliftons of Lytham Hall were primarily regarded in the mid-nineteenth century as the ancestral owners of one of Lancashire's largest and most prestigious agricultural estates (Figure 8, p. 118). In their life-style and behaviour they reflected a set of attitudes which membership of a narrow landed élite would lead us to expect. Land generated the greater part of their wealth and it confirmed their lofty social and political status in county affairs.¹ Yet, towards the end of the century, the estate's growing commitment towards extending urban development along the Fylde coast became more pronounced. This shift in emphasis from 'country' to 'town' is significant for several reasons.

First, it offers an opportunity to analyse landed attitudes towards wealth creation and the management of an estate with diverse interests. In particular, the Cliftons' far more energetic interest in urban development, strongly evident over the last quarter of the century in particular, responded to a shift in managerial priorities. The Cliftons were not alone in having a deep-seated attachment to the primacy of their

1 For a wider discussion of the financial and managerial affairs of the Clifton estate see G. Rogers, 'Social and economic change on Lancashire landed estates during the nineteenth century with special reference to the Clifton estate, 1832-1916' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Lancaster Univ., 1981).

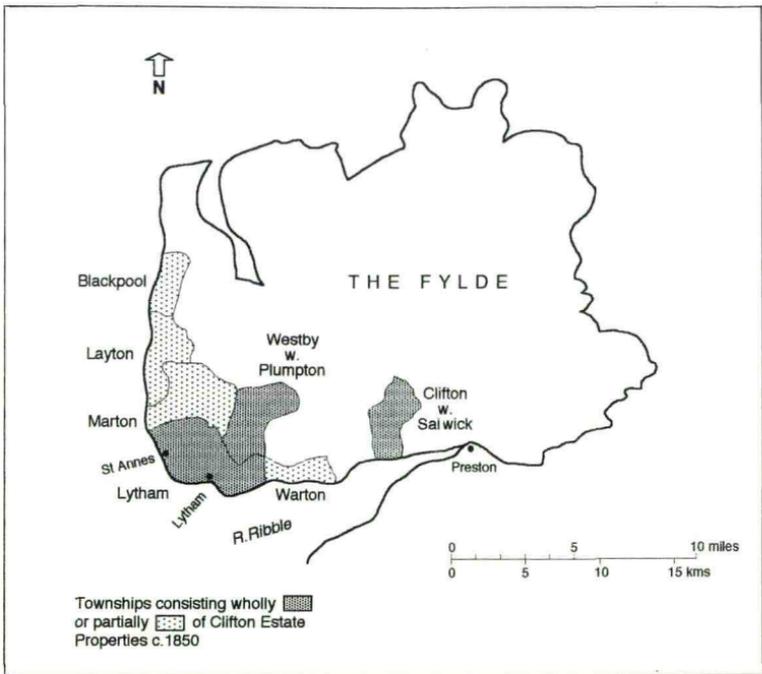


Figure 8 *Location of the Clifton Estate, c. 1850*

agricultural estates.² But, whereas ground and property rents had formerly been looked upon as additional and potentially very useful income, they came to be regarded as a financial lifeline.

However, the hope that residential building would improve current income had a paradoxical twist to it. A second area of concern is the way in which a growing urban community on the estate introduced the possibility of a clash of interests and values which challenged the once easy assumption of

2 Running to 16,000 acres, the Clifton estate was one of the largest in the county. It extended across the southern Fylde along a coastal strip from Clifton-with-Salwick in the east to Blackpool in the west. In 1832 farm and cottage rents contributed 95 per cent of the sizeable annual income of almost £25,000. Even allowing for additional land purchases and the inflationary spiral of the Napoleonic period, agriculture had served the estate well, considering that estate income had stood at a more modest £3,000 in 1785.

authority and control. In short, what a landowner stood to gain on the financial roundabout he stood to lose on the social swings.

Thirdly, the Cliftons' urban connection is of more general historiographical interest. Over recent years the links between landed estates and urban development have been the focus of detailed attention. Conventional wisdom once assumed that high standards of planning, evident in many nineteenth-century 'new towns', flowed naturally from the presence of one or two locally dominant landowners and, therefore, from the stricter controls they were likely to impose. This causal relationship was particularly pronounced, it was thought, in the spas and watering-places of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. The ordered spaciousness of resorts like Eastbourne, Skegness, and Bexhill, dominated respectively by the dukes of Devonshire, the earls of Scarbrough, and the De La Warrs, springs to mind.³ Of course, it is comfortable to draw the conclusion that a town's social and physical character was an automatic response to a landowner's territorial pre-eminence and therefore to his powers of control. However, this assumption rests on a belief that landowners behaved in consistent and predictable ways, whereas it would be more accurate to say that landowners became more idiosyncratic in their behaviour as time passed. Their impact on local communities depended largely on how they viewed their own changing role and purposes.

Some no doubt had little more than predatory ambitions to squeeze the maximum return from their urban estates at minimal personal expense. For instance, the ordered ground plan of Southport, the scale of its public amenities, and the presence of two dominant landowning families flatters to deceive. In fact the town's imposing façade owed more to the initiative of the resort's leading citizenry than it did to any inspired leadership on the part of the major landowners.⁴ But

3 *Patricians, power and politics in nineteenth-century towns*, ed. D. Cannadine (Leicester, 1982), p. 12; J. K. Walton, *The English seaside resort: a social history, 1750-1914* (Leicester, 1983), pp. 104-5.

4 J. Liddle, 'Estate management and land reform politics: the Hesketh and Scarisbrick families and the making of Southport, 1842 to 1914', in *Patricians*, ed. Cannadine, pp. 133-74.

for others, reasons of a social and aesthetic nature pressed as heavily as financial considerations. Where it was thought important to shape developments which were fully in keeping with a landowner's own aspirations and interests there was no alternative to his active participation. In this respect Eastbourne, under the close control of the Devonshires, is the archetypal aristocratic creation.

As a final introductory point, it is important to keep in mind that landowners' motives could change over time. Many of the landed families connected with urban development were also the owners of expansive estates. Therefore, a landowner's policy towards the urban domain could and did change in relation to an unfolding strategy for his estate as a whole. It was no accident, for instance, that the earl of Scarborough injected greater urgency into the promotion of Scarborough in the early 1880s when the cold winds of recession started blowing across his agricultural property.⁵ Similarly, the role of the Cliftons as urban developers is of interest not only in the sense that their territorial power had an obvious physical impact on the towns with which they were associated. Their experience casts an important light on the way in which a landowner's attitude, policy, and function could vary quite sharply in space and time.

The Cliftons were the major landed participants in resort development along the Fylde coast. They were closely involved in the early stages of Blackpool's expansion into a bustling seaside resort and they maintained a territorial connection with the town until 1920. They were the moving force behind the entirely new creation of St Annes, whose foundation stone was laid in 1875. Finally, over the course of the nineteenth century, a small but socially exclusive resort gradually took shape around their ancestral home, Lytham Hall. Yet their role in each of these towns was markedly different.

Blackpool, in fact, staged the Cliftons' first real foray into urban development.⁶ They had firm plans to invest in select

5 T. W. Beastall, 'A south Yorkshire estate in the late nineteenth century', *Agricultural History Review*, XIV (1966), pp. 40-4.

6 The Cliftons' plans for central Blackpool are detailed in J. K. Walton, 'The social development of Blackpool, 1778-1914' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Lancaster Univ., 1974).

residential building on plots they owned along the central foreshore at Talbot Square. Clearly a long-term strategy was in view rather than thoughts of making a quick profit; yet these plans had all but been abandoned by 1847. Inferior building on neighbouring properties crowding in on an area intended for high-class housing threatened the viability of the whole exercise. From that point onwards the Blackpool and Layton Hall properties were regarded as a means of raising ready capital, which coloured the attitude of the estate towards the town thereafter. In effect, the Cliftons exchanged the role of urban planners for that of land speculators. They became barely distinguishable from the town's innumerable small landowners whose paramount objective was to extract the maximum profit from their holdings, except that, in disposing of property, they could afford to wait in order to reap a richer harvest at some later date.

By contrast with the landowner's parasitic policy towards Blackpool, in crucial respects Lytham was a world apart. Lytham was essentially the squire's town; and, though the estate never lost sight of securing an improving income from its urban property wherever it was situated, other considerations coloured the landowner's attitude towards the resort taking shape outside the gates to the family seat. He was concerned to maintain controls over the town's size, its aesthetic and physical qualities, and its social and political character almost to the extent, it could be argued, of actually stifling growth.

It is possible to delineate quite clearly distinct phases in Lytham's development.⁷ The first phase, roughly from the mid-1840s to the 1880s, coincided with the emergence of other planned resorts, notably Torquay, Eastbourne, and Bournemouth, among others. As was the case in all these places, this period in Lytham's history was characterized by the unchallenged supremacy of the controlling landed family

7 D. Cannadine, 'Introduction', in *Patricians*, ed. Cannadine, pp. 1-15 at 8-11, identifies a multi-phase model of urban development in which landed leadership assumed a dominant role until the third quarter of the nineteenth century, giving way to a shift in power towards middle-class municipal control, and culminating in the relegation of the aristocratic leaders to the position of impotent, ceremonial figureheads.

and the mainly docile subservience of the urban community. This was followed by a second phase, broadly the 1890s and the first decade of the new century, in which feelings of mutual dependency gave way to a separation of interest and at times open confrontation between the estate and the town's leaders.

The Clifton estate reigned supreme in Lytham long after its modest beginnings as a select, middle-class resort in the late 1830s, principally for two reasons. The landowner and his agent were resolved to retain firm powers of control, and there was no effective alternative to their leadership. After all, in a place as small as Lytham, dominated as it was by a single landowner, there was no one else capable of taking the initiative in defining and financing initial developments. However, the vision and energy belonged not so much to Thomas Clifton as to his land agent, James Fair; and it was following his appointment in 1834 that limited efforts were made to improve the town's image as a select residential retreat. Some of the older thatched properties were pulled down, new houses were constructed, part of the beach was levelled, a start was made in creating a promenade, and, in 1840, the new Clifton Arms Hotel was opened to provide 'the most perfect accommodation for families of the highest distinction'.⁸

Once plans for Blackpool had finally been abandoned and a railway link made with the Preston and Wyre line, the estate embarked on more energetic improvement schemes. But success in any kind of urban venture was not a foregone conclusion. Lytham was faced with stiff competition from across the Ribble estuary at Southport in attracting inward investment. The success or failure of a new town rested more particularly on the terms of a landowner's leasing policy, his readiness to stimulate building operations, and the provision of essential social amenities. It was the Clifton estate which determined the ground-plan for the resort, defined the type of house-building that was to take place, and found the capital for the initial improvements. Indeed, financing construction work in Lytham during the 1840s, commencing with the reconstruction of the main thoroughfare, Clifton Street,

8 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (Clifton papers) 1183.

contributed significantly to the steadily accumulating debt charged on the estate. In total about 100 properties were built between 1846 and 1848, of which a substantial number were commissioned and directly financed by the estate itself in order to encourage further private development in specified locations. But the greater part of the £37,000 invested by the estate in Lytham during the 1840s and 1850s went into laying out the promenade and constructing the show-piece residences along the sea-front and adjacent terraces.⁹

The most interesting aspect of this phase in the town's growth is the way in which it focused conflicting emotions. Opening up building land and inviting middle-class families to settle was one thing, but retaining control over the town's physical and social character was another. Power in effect belonged to those who owned the land and who spent the most money, and the Cliftons guarded their privileged position. In fact it could be argued that this lay at the root of Lytham's unspectacular expansion between the 1840s and 1880s when landed influence over the town's affairs was at its height.

At times it appeared that a compelling concern to preserve tone, selectness, and above all else habits of social and political deference towards the landowner transcended purely financial considerations. Indeed, Thomas Clifton's attitude could be described at best as ambivalent. He was less persuaded that promoting the town would bring its financial rewards. Clearly he gave way to his agent's advice, but he hardly greeted the costly improvements taking place in the 1840s with unreserved enthusiasm.¹⁰ However, another set of emotions crowded in. His own undisguised social and political prejudices warned against inviting 'hordes of Manchester men' to descend on the place. 'I must confess', he railed

9 Ibid. DDC1 (1966 deposit), insurance valuation 1890; mortgage deed 1891; *Preston Guardian*, 1 July 1848; *Preston Pilot*, 27 Sept. 1851.

10 If Thomas Clifton was cautious towards investing heavily in urban development, he would certainly have been aware of the financial disaster which befell Sir Peter Hesketh Fleetwood, whose vision of a new port and resort in neighbouring Fleetwood during the 1830s had landed him with personal debts of £104,000 by 1840: Meols Hall, Southport, Hesketh estate accounts, Buck and Dickson to Charles Hesketh, 30 Dec. 1857.

against one resident who dared to challenge the conditions of his lease, 'to some prejudices against the class to which Mr. Hornby belongs—cotton spinners, and persons who have the constant habit of driving bargains, are always attempting to overreach themselves.' Lady Clifton displayed very similar feelings. 'We have the misfortune', she complained to her agent, 'to belong to a county where merchants and wealth are far above, in their own opinion, the aristocracy and the old landed gentry.'¹¹ Thomas Clifton had similar fears about Lytham's physical transformation. In fact he objected to Fair's proposals to extend building operations to the west end of the town because views from the hall might be obstructed. If he recognized the importance of inducing people to build he did 'not feel justified in sanctioning anything which might be deemed a nuisance to those who might hereafter possess the property and might wish to inhabit the hall'.¹² In part this may explain why an extended scheme for Lytham's development did not materialize until after Thomas Clifton's death in 1851.

The pace accelerated thereafter. Unlike his father, John Talbot Clifton took a much more hardened attitude to business affairs. Land was there to be exploited. 'Land now', he asserted in 1850, 'is a very different article to what it used to be. It is a raw material from which, like the manufacturers, we are bound to get the greatest return'.¹³ Together with his agent, Thomas Fair, he produced a comprehensive ground-plan for Lytham's future expansion. It envisaged a district of exclusive residential building extending from the central and promenade areas of the town westward over the sand dunes in the direction of Blackpool. However, expansion did not mean any sacrifice of controls. The estate was still able to be very selective in how and by whom land was to be developed. Until the late 1870s land was never leased to large-scale developers. Instead the much more typical leaseholder was the widow, spinster, retired businessman, clergyman, or solicitor, together

11 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), Thomas Clifton to James Fair, 12 Mar. 1846, 6 Oct. 1848; DDC1 1207, Lady Clifton to Thomas Fair, July 1866.

12 Ibid. (1966 deposit), Thomas Clifton to James Fair, no date.

13 Ibid. DDC1 1325, box 11, John Talbot Clifton to James Fair, 1850.

with individuals already known to the estate: local tradesmen and some of the larger, more prosperous tenant farmers. They invariably took small plots for the purpose of having their own houses built or occasionally one or two additional properties intended to provide a small income in the future.¹⁴ Furthermore, building covenants incorporated into leases were strict and the estate was uncompromisingly severe in its terms and conditions when it might have paid to be more flexible. Powers of inspection were regularly used and lessees were harassed over any infringement of their lease terms. Such stringent conditions and vigilance were no doubt essential in preserving residential selectness. At the same time, an over-zealous attitude, when taken to extreme lengths and coupled with high ground rents, could have the effect of driving potential developers away.

Not surprisingly, it was the estate which continued to lead the way in providing the necessary infrastructure for the town. Between 1857 and 1865 £5,200 was spent levelling the sandhills to the west of the town, extending the beach, laying out building plots, and forming a carriage drive. When the area behind Clifton Street towards the east end was being developed for lower-status accommodation and 'company' or lodging houses during the late 1860s and early 1870s the pace was set once more by the estate in building blocks of cottages along Westby Street, East and West Cliffe, and Freckleton Street; and it was the estate which assumed the responsibility for clearing away some of the old, squalid properties scattered throughout the back streets of the central and west end districts.¹⁵

Attention to such environmental considerations as

- 14 Unless otherwise stated, evidence of the estate's leasing policy can be found in the virtually complete set of nineteenth-century Lytham deeds which comprise part of the very large 1966 deposit of Clifton muniments at Lancs. R.O. Other deeds are in the 1954 Clifton deposit and in DDC1 2831, box 2.
- 15 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 1325, box 1, plan of development sites in Lytham, Sept. 1851; box 2, statement of payments by Col. Clifton for beach improvements; DDC1 (1966 deposit), mortgage deeds on property in Lytham, 1891; Charles Clifton to James Fair, 1855; purchase of cottages, barns, and shippens in Bath Street, 1856; *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 12 May 1880.

landscaping and parks, the provision of amenities such as churches and assembly rooms, and the maintenance of acceptable sanitary standards were all essential prerequisites in the creation of middle-class suburbia. In the case of Lytham, they were met by the landowning family.¹⁶ Over the third quarter of the century they provided the site and endowed the church of St John's, appropriately located among the marine villas springing up along East Beach. They were the financial mainstay behind the town's gas company, established in 1847. The initiative for a waterworks company also emanated from the estate office in 1853, and the Cliftons were the largest single investor. When public subscription failed to produce the capital needed to build public baths in the town in the late 1860s, Clifton money, this time £6,650, again saved the scheme. They were the major financial force behind the Pier Company formed in 1865; they bailed out the Masonic Hall in 1870; and in the following year they contributed £600 towards the cost of urgent repairs to the fabric of the parish church. The family's patronage was crowned by Lowther Gardens, a park of 13 acres created by the estate at the west end of the town during the early 1870s at a cost of £12,000. No doubt it was an aesthetically pleasing feature, but it was also intended to cultivate greater interest among prospective builders in sites as yet undeveloped along the western carriageway.

The estate was just as demonstrative in exerting its will over Lytham's social and political affairs. No public event took place without the family's influence making itself felt. This was very much the province of the landowner's wife and his agent, and very little escaped Lady Clifton's attention. She ensured that the family headed subscriptions to every local charity and organization: the Lytham Lifeboat Society, Shipwrecked Mariners, the pier, the promenade band, the recreation fund, and so on. She insisted that charitable relief, the central core of landed benevolence, remained the exclusive preserve of the squire rather than a responsibility

16 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), ledger books 1-2; DDC1 1325, box 1; C. Arthur, *A history of the Fylde waterworks, 1861-1911* ([Blackpool], 1911), pp. 5-6, 11-19, 26-30; A. J. Price, *Municipal works at Lytham* (Preston, 1928), p. 2; *Preston Pilot*, 6 Feb. 1847.

for the local churches and their parishioners. As she explained to Thomas Fair: 'I think now that is a fashion for them to like to manage the poor themselves with no interference from the owner of the estate, except as regards subscriptions for beautifying the churches—this is in my opinion a mistake, particularly on an estate like the Colonel's at Lytham.'¹⁷ Again, when a proposal for a convalescent hospital was being talked about in 1876 the dominant concern was that 'proper procedure' should be followed and deference paid to the wishes of the estate for, 'if once it is permitted that residents are to have a voice in the matter of buildings . . . great difficulties would ensue'. In fact the land agent was censured even for consulting Lytham's citizens on the matter.¹⁸

Political controls went hand-in-hand with social controls. If the promotion of Lytham as a residential resort was financially attractive, it was a consideration which had to be weighed against the danger of inviting the incursion of political and religious subversives. After all, the Cliftons took their political responsibilities seriously. Thomas Clifton had devoted much of his time and energy to the Conservative and Protectionist cause in the North Lancashire constituency and no one preached the doctrine of High Toryism louder than he.¹⁹ His son, John Talbot Clifton, won the North Lancashire by-election of 1844 as a Protectionist and he was himself the passionately committed chairman of the local Agricultural Protectionist Association. Thomas Clifton's defence of the Established Church was no less fervent. His son's growing Peelite sympathies were undoubtedly a source of some embarrassment, but John Talbot's support of the Maynooth grant came as a bitter personal blow. This would certainly explain his behaviour towards Catholic and Nonconformist groups in Lytham during the closing years of his life, which carried more than a suspicion of victimization. Clifton did not disguise his intentions. He wanted 'to combat the spreading

17 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 1208, Lady Clifton to Thomas Fair, 30 Nov. 1867.

18 Ibid. DDC1 1229, T.H. Clifton to Thomas Fair, 10 May 1876; DDC1 1217, Lady Clifton to Thomas Fair, 11 May 1876.

19 D. Foster, 'The politics of uncontested elections: North Lancashire, 1832–1865', *Northern History*, XIII (1977), pp. 232–47.

influence of dissenting opinion and Romanism in the parish'.²⁰

The family remained active in political affairs following Thomas Clifton's death. His son's mild flirtation with reform in the late 1840s reflected more his impulsive nature than a fundamental departure from his family's Tory allegiance. He campaigned as vigorously against the Liberals as his father had done against the Whigs. Indeed, the greater part of his correspondence to his land agent was concerned with political rather than financial or managerial affairs. Lytham, in fact, saw more of its squire in the run-up to a general election than at any other time. As landowner and agent seem to have been acutely aware, an expanding town always courted the danger of attracting elements who were not well disposed either towards the landowner or his politics. Election time invariably saw efforts to counter the opposition as it surfaced, and a contested parliamentary election could certainly be relied on to inject more than the usual vigour into the estate's political attentions to the town. In the election of 1868, for instance, every effort was made to protect Lytham's political impregnability. Thomas Fair was instructed to draw up a blacklist of persons, particularly tradesmen and retailers, suspected even of harbouring Liberal sympathies. He further promised to 'root out' political offenders who actively solicited support in Lytham.²¹ Indeed, accusations that the estate office used 'unfair practices' may not have been entirely without foundation.

At the local level there was very little danger that Lytham would go the way of Southport and become a spawning ground for radical opinion, despite Lady Clifton's complaint that 'so much is done for the Independents yet they will form themselves into a strong class against the proprietor of the estate'.²² For one thing the land agent was far too attentive to

- 20 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 1203, John Talbot Clifton to James Fair, 2 Apr. 1845; DDC1 (1966 deposit), Revd J. Walmsley to J. Fair, 4 June 1848; Revd Robinson to Thomas Fair, 22 Feb. 1848.
- 21 Ibid. DDC1 1209, Lady Clifton to Thomas Fair, 17 Nov. 1868; DDC1 1235, Thomas Fair to Lady Clifton, 24 Oct., 24 Nov. 1868.
- 22 Liddle, 'Estate management'; Lancs. R.O., DDC1 1209, Lady Clifton to Thomas Fair, 17 Nov. 1868.

allow that to happen. He was the leading figure on every local body, including the town's Board of Improvement Commissioners, and he rarely missed an opportunity to impress on Lytham's citizenry the benefits which flowed from the landowner's patronage. Dissenting voices were regarded as a personal attack and an act of betrayal against the landowner himself. In any event, it remained the case that the town needed the landowner and this, in effect, reinforced the estate's hegemony over the town's affairs. Lytham's Improvement Board, established in 1847, did not have the will or financial resources to steer an independent course in shaping the town's development.²³ Much continued to depend on the estate's patronage and regulatory powers in giving the town the kind of physical and social climate which was as much in keeping with the residents' own interests as it was with the landowner's. Lytham needed the landowner's patronage and it did not pay to offend. A proposal in 1860 that building plans should be deposited with the 'requisite authority' as well as with the estate office was denounced publicly by the agent as 'a great piece of impertinence' and subsequently dropped.²⁴ When challenged on its rights of ownership to Lowther Gardens in 1878, at considerable expense and in the full glare of local publicity, the estate successfully hauled the case through Liverpool crown court. 'A lesson in gratitude for the residents of Lytham', was how Thomas Fair described the incident.²⁵

Yet until the 1870s these were isolated occurrences. More usual were the displays of gratitude and deference which greeted the landowner's gifts of land and money. It was no less than the squire and his agent felt entitled to expect. Clifton

23 Given the town's lethargic growth and the low level of rates-supported income the Board of Improvement Commissioners could not have generated sufficient funds to assume any kind of independent initiative. Even by 1879 the rates brought in less than £3,000 per annum, more than half of which went towards interest payments and the reserve fund, leaving barely £1,300 per annum for general and administrative purposes.

24 *Lancs. R.O.*, MBLs 2/3 (Lytham Improvement Commissioners); DDC1 1325, box 11.

25 *Ibid.* DDC1 (1966 deposit), Thomas Fair to John Talbot Clifton, 1878.

had provided virtually all the town's social amenities, its park, its churches, its promenade. His stature and landed influence were essential in preserving Lytham's social tone and residential selectness. In return for services rendered it was indeed assumed that the town would defer to the landowner's proprietary rights and privileges: to order the resort's physical appearance, to determine the uses of and access to the foreshore, and to guide the religious, cultural, and political life of the community.

The 1870s marked something of a watershed in the estate's financial position, and this in turn brought changes in the attitude of the estate towards its urban property and in its relations with the urban communities. By then, the quiet confidence of the 1850s and 1860s had given way to a troubled uneasiness. Current income was failing to keep pace with spiralling expenditure driven relentlessly upwards by servicing the costs of burgeoning debt.²⁶ Farm rents had virtually levelled out and an impending agricultural depression would wipe out the prospect of an immediate improvement. Injecting a greater impetus into building development, without incurring heavy capital costs, seemed to offer a way out of the problem. At the same time, expectations were built around over-optimistic projections of the future rents which new building land might generate. Nevertheless, the prospect that vacant land in Lytham and St Annes would produce another £22,000 per annum must have been an enticing one.²⁷

This was what was clearly in mind when the scheme for a new resort at St Annes was launched in 1875. Situated halfway between Blackpool and Lytham, St Annes promised to open up building land between the two established resorts as a socially exclusive residential haven for middle-class families.

- 26 Between 1862 and 1900 the current account showed a surplus on only seven occasions despite the fact that annual income had grown to over £40,000 in 1899. Over the same period about £338,000's worth of debt piled up. Servicing interest charges on this scale of debts absorbed an increasing proportion of the estate's gross revenues: Rogers, thesis, pp. 52-86.
- 27 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), estimates of building land yet to be leased, 1887 and 1890; surveyors' reports on value of freehold interest on land between Lytham and Blackpool.

Yet, so far as the estate was concerned, there were crucial differences between the early development of Lytham and the promotion of St Annes. First, the landowner did not take responsibility for major capital investment in the creation of St Annes as was the case at Lytham. Second, the actual day-to-day development of the town was left in the hands of a large building company. As a matter of increasing urgency the estate wanted to see building take place as rapidly as possible. At the same time, it also wanted to maintain a level of control sufficient to protect its own interests but without any real financial risk to itself. In short, the estate now wanted the best of all possible worlds and, in the end, got nothing. The estate would not and could not assist with making the financial provision essential to the resort's successful take-off. But in abandoning its former role of direct participation it consequently sacrificed the kinds of controls it had formerly and uncompromisingly imposed on Lytham.

Ideas for opening up building land on the coast were being toyed with as soon as the Blackpool-Lytham branch line was complete by 1863. However, it was some years before anything materialized, partly because investment in the agricultural estate and the expansion of Lytham absorbed attention and precious resources, but mainly because the land agent was anxious to find developers prepared to shoulder the major costs. Indeed he rejected early approaches from one building company which, whilst prepared to take out a lease on 2½ miles of coastline, demanded the estate contribute £20,000 towards road construction.²⁸ The agreement which Thomas Fair finally negotiated with the St Annes Land and Building Company between 1874 and 1876 kept the estate's financial commitment to a minimum.²⁹ The company, a consortium of east Lancashire businessmen, initially agreed to take out a lease on 80 acres with a reserved option on further plots, but such was their initial confidence that by 1876 they had a lease on 318 acres with the intention of eventually

28 Ibid. DDC1 2831, box 2, Charles Evans to Thomas Fair, Dec. 1873.

29 Ibid. boxes 2 and 4, agreement with St Annes Building Company, 1874 and 1875; DDC1 (1966 deposit), prospectus of St Annes Building Company, 1875; lease no 4, July 1876; J. Maxwell to Thomas Fair, 6 Apr. 1876.

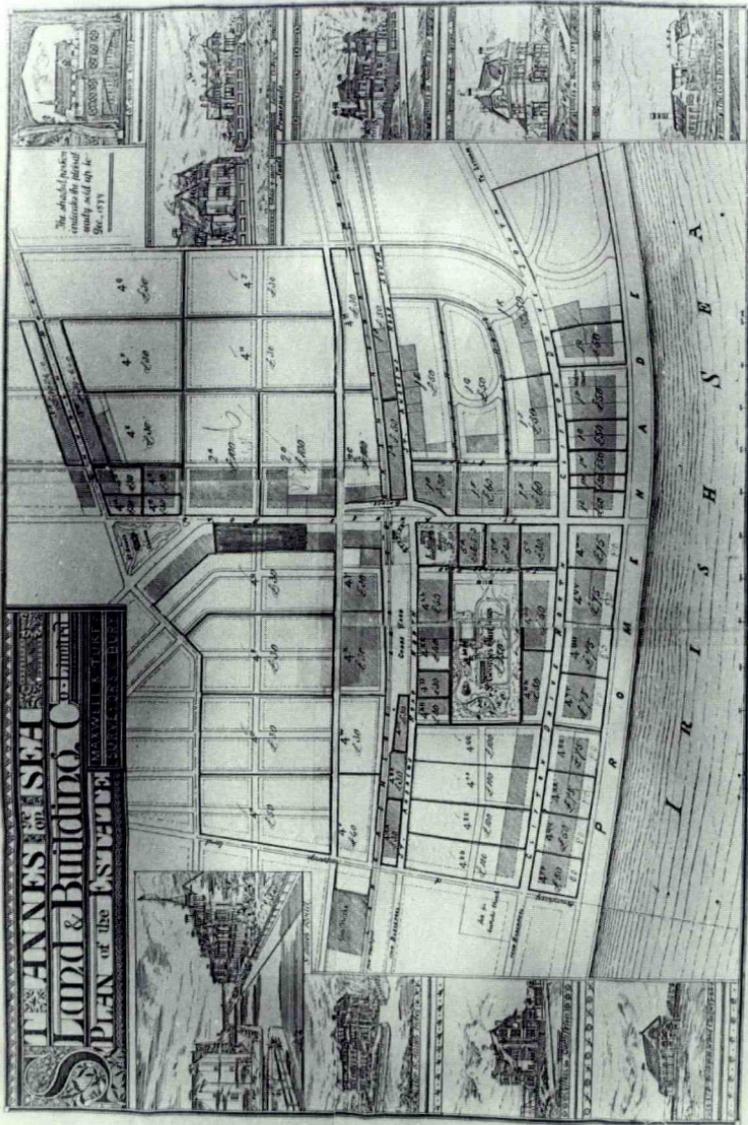


Figure 9 St Annes Land and Building Company's plan for the new estate, showing plots sold up to the end of 1877

developing one square mile (Figure 9). The estate itself could not have secured better terms. It was guaranteed a steadily increasing income projected over a 20-year period, and the company was legally bound to provide most of the capital involved. It was covenanted to spend at least £70,000 on roads, houses, and hotels as well as a public market, town hall, baths, and pier, and with the stipulation that £50,000 of the capital should be expended over the first four years. Against this level of spending, the estate's contribution to the construction of just two arterial roads paled into insignificance. St Annes, however, was beset by problems from the very outset. Potential investors did not share the confidence of the building company that the development had a promising future and wanted to see more in the way of a firm foundation for the place before committing themselves.³⁰ Yet, the provision of an initial boost was stalked by a conflict of interest among the major participants, the landowner, local board, and building company. The conflict was very revealing about changes to managerial policy on the Clifton estate.

Indeed, the early history of St Annes was a sorry saga of charge and countercharge, claim and counterclaim which stifled any progress. First, the matter of leasehold controls soured relations between the building company and the estate from the very beginning. The land agent, Thomas Fair, did not want to see the development impeded unduly. At the same time he was customarily anxious that high standards of planning and construction should be observed.³¹ In their ebullient mood of 1874 the directors of the building company were probably easy to bring to terms. But in face of the grim reality of actually having to persuade builders to invest in the town, their emphasis shifted towards reducing any constraints to a minimum. Whereas Fair lambasted the company that the quality of construction work did not meet his expectations, the company was unhappy with having to comply with any restrictive building regulations at all on the grounds that landowners in the county's other resorts—notably the

30 Lancs. R.O., DDCl (1966 deposit), J. Gregory to Thomas Fair, 16 May 1874; T. Kay to Thomas Fair, 18 Jan. 1875.

31 Ibid. J. Maxwell to Thomas Fair, 17 Mar. 1876; Aldridge and Deacon to Thomas Fair, 7 Mar. 1876, 5 July, 14 Nov. 1877.

Heskeths, Scarisbricks, and Weld-Blundells in Southport and Birkdale—did not impose the same conditions on their lessees.³²

Despite initial differences, the estate and building company eventually came to occupy roughly the same ground on the matter of building controls. The truth was that the landowner could no more afford to parade stringent overbearing standards than could the building company. In the end high ideals and an insistence on authority had to bow to financial exigencies. However, financial problems proved much more significant than the difficulties which stemmed from enforcing building regulations. Indeed the early years of St Annes' development were littered with casualties. Between 1875 and 1889 no fewer than forty-five investors filed bankruptcy petitions.³³ In hindsight it seems nothing short of a miracle that the St Annes Building Company did not figure in the list. By 1879 it was itself in serious financial trouble. The euphoria of 1874 had given way to an acute sense of desperation. Houses stood empty, prospective builders had taken flight, income was falling away sharply, and debts had started to pile up. With sixty-three houses and villas standing unoccupied and property values stagnating it was not surprising that most of the company's leased plots remained undeveloped. By no means was that the sum total of the resort's problems. Other associated companies formed to manage the town's amenities—the hotel, pier, gas, and public gardens companies—inevitably ran into the same problems.³⁴ One by one they had to be rescued by the parent company, and it was only the commitment and private capital of individual directors that enabled St Annes to survive these years. In short, the idea of this new resort was kept financially afloat, not by the estate, but by a small and determined body of men who were not prepared to let it die; men like Joseph Whitehead, the first chairman of the board, who tore up his personal guarantee for £10,000 when the company started

32 Lancs. R.O., DDCI (1966 deposit), J. Maxwell to Thomas Fair, 20 Mar. 1876; W. Porritt to Thomas Fair, 8 Jan. 1880, 6 Oct. 1883.

33 *Preston Guardian*, 16 June 1894.

34 Lancs. R.O., DDCI (1966 deposit), report on house building in St Annes, 1879; accounts of St Annes Building Company, 1890.

running into difficulties in 1878; and above all William J. Porritt, the owner of some of the largest quarries and cotton mills in east Lancashire, who was said to have ploughed more than £250,000 of his own money into the town's survival.³⁵

For its part the estate emerged from this débâcle with a somewhat less than flattering reputation. The main barrier to St Annes' development was the lack of good roads and adequate sewerage arrangements. After all, it was on the strength of its claim to a healthy environment that the resort was first launched. No one was more aware of this prerequisite than the directors of the building company, but they did not see themselves as having the means or the responsibility for developing a modern road and drainage system.³⁶ Not only were the estate and building company locked in public combat over this issue but the St Annes local board quickly entered the fray. The local board itself had been hastily established in 1878 and promoted by an assumption in both the estate office and the building company that once it had been created the rates would gradually take care of expensive and desperately needed road and sewerage systems and provide the solution to an intractable problem.³⁷ But the attitude they encountered from the local board was considerably less amenable than they had assumed. Cumulative voting procedure, based on property qualifications, resulted in the return of a board comprised largely of farmers from the outlying districts who were distinctly hostile to the idea of funding a sewerage system for the property owners and developers of a town in which they had no personal stake.³⁸ Efforts to engineer a more amenable local board came up against the same impregnable barrier of conflicting interests. Property owners in the town petitioned the Local Government Board to reduce the geographical extent of the St Annes

35 *Preston Guardian*, 31 Oct. 1896.

36 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), Maxwell and Tuke to Thomas Fair, Sept. 1887.

37 *Ibid.*, Thomas Fair's notes on petition by ratepayers and property owners of St Annes to Local Government Board, 1877. Fair's major consideration was that 'a considerable saving will, by this means, be affected to the lessees'.

38 Lancs. R.O., MBLS 4/1, St Annes Local Board minutes, 17 Aug. 1878.

district on the basis that a small body of ratepayers could not support the cost of maintaining over 20 miles of roads in the outlying areas as well as undertaking urgently needed sewerage works within the town itself.³⁹ After all, with only 200 ratepayers there was not much financial scope for action. Nevertheless the proposal would have produced the desired result of undermining the farmers' representation on the local board. The petition failed. In part, it foundered on the land agent's own equivocation. He was not prepared to throw the estate's unreserved support behind it. Eager as he was to have a more energetic board in St Annes, he also felt under a more traditional obligation to protect the interests of the estate's tenant farmers.

In any case Thomas Fair steadfastly refused to be swayed from the view that financial responsibility for major improvement work in the town lay primarily with the Land and Building Company. For its part the company wanted to see a local board elected which was sympathetic to rate-supported intervention. At the same time, securing a co-operative board had to be balanced against a real danger that high rates might deter potential investors. Consequently, the directors were more inclined to pass responsibility back to the estate in relation to the more expensive undertakings. This deadlock continued into the 1880s. Meanwhile the resort suffered. With the estate, the Land and Building Company, and the local board locked in battle and each refusing to give ground, nothing was effectively done to tackle the ever-pressing problems of road construction, lighting, and sanitation. Until the 1890s St Annes had no road system worthy of the name.⁴⁰ Road maintenance was basically left to the voluntary efforts of individuals and, even where roads were put in order by frontagers, they had no assurance that the local board would adopt them.⁴¹ This impasse between the property owners and the board effectively neutralized any

39 Lancs. R.O., MBL5 4/1, Board minutes, 11 Jan. 1879; *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 22 May 1878.

40 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), W. Porritt to T. Fair, 11 Dec. 1881.

41 *Ibid.* MBL5 4/1, Highway minutes, 29 July, 2 Aug., 1 Nov. 1884; *ibid.* 5/5, Sanitary, Highways, and Building Committee minutes, 3 July 1880; DDC1 (1966 deposit), W. Porritt to Thomas Fair, 21 Dec. 1881.

attempts to improve the major thoroughfare of the town, namely the promenade and coastal road which were central to the attractiveness of any coastal resort. The estate took an uncompromising stand in asserting full proprietary rights to the foreshore along its coastal boundaries even to the extent of refusing the local board permission to remove shingle for the purpose of road repair.⁴² Short-sighted as this course of action may have appeared, the rights of landownership took precedence over the immediate needs of a struggling resort.

The sanitary condition of the town was by far the most pressing problem. By 1889 St Annes' sewerage system had barely improved on the primitive arrangements which had existed at the town's inception in 1875. Its claim to a healthy environment amounted to nothing more than a surface drain which carried waste south of the railway into the sea, and an open ditch which drained the northern part into Lytham's surrounding watercourses, eventually discharging into the Ribble estuary.⁴³ In fact it was not until 1884 that the local board engaged a contractor to clear the town's privies and ashpits, and even he was driven to resign within six months.⁴⁴ Yet, if Thomas Fair was impatient for progress, he was just as determined that the Land and Building Company should carry the risk and the costs of improvement work. He was prepared to use his influence with the farmers only when the building company gave a positive undertaking to underwrite a sewerage scheme.⁴⁵ However, the town's principal developers were no less adamant that the initiative should come from the estate. As James Maxwell, builder and one-time director of the Land and Building Company, explained, there was no private capital available and the local board was totally unresponsive to the idea of improvement work. 'I have been struggling for months', he went on, 'to get a sewerage scheme but I am

42 Ibid. MBLS 4/1, Local Board minutes, 3 Sept. 1879, 24 Feb. 1882; DDC1 (1966 deposit), Wilson and Deacon to Woodcock and Sons, 20 Dec. 1878.

43 Ibid. DDC1 (1966 deposit), St Annes drainage schemes.

44 Ibid. MBLS 5/7, Nuisance and Lighting Committee minutes, 25 Oct. 1878, 13 Aug. 1881, 1 Mar. 1884, 3 Jan. 1885.

45 Ibid. DDC1 (1966 deposit), W. Porritt to Thomas Fair, 30 Sept. 1882; Thomas Fair to J. Maxwell, 27 Sept. 1883.

simply single-handed not only against the Board but the whole community of farmers and nothing but a generous proposal from the estate can help much.⁴⁶ With the building company and the estate effectively neutralizing each other, the local board was able to procrastinate throughout the 1880s. Two sewerage schemes, in 1881 and 1883, were rejected and by 1887 the Board had not even committed itself to the principle that improvement work was necessary.⁴⁷

The real casualties in this tripartite struggle were the St Annes residents themselves, small builders, property owners, and shopkeepers, individuals who had invested their all in the resort and who felt cheated by the ineptitude and apathy of the local board, dominated by a coterie of farmers, and by the obduracy of the building company and the estate. 'Improvement' rather than 'economy' became the battle-cry of the besieged citizenry of St Annes, and a commitment grew to the idea that only rateable intervention would bring a solution to the problem.⁴⁸ Their chance came in the 1890s. As a result of the marked improvement in the building trade generally, rising demand for land, and the spirited efforts of individual residents who had kept the resort alive out of their own pockets, St Annes experienced a sharp upturn in fortune. A sudden surge in development was reflected in an increase in the town's rateable value from £8,409 in 1878 to £13,368 in 1890 and then a dramatic leap to £21,000 by 1893.⁴⁹

Expansion brought important changes in the composition of the local board.⁵⁰ The farmers' monopoly was gradually whittled away so that by 1894 their representation had been reduced to just one member. Control passed into the hands of property owners, retailers, and contractors, and the board now began to assert its independent spirit and its independence of means. A parliamentary Improvement Act

46 Lancs. R.O., DDCl (1966 deposit), J. Maxwell to Thomas Fair, 2 May, 24 Sept. 1883.

47 Ibid. Thomas Fair to Local Government Board, 2 Jan. 1883; Local Government Board to Thomas Fair, Apr. 1887.

48 *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 21 July, 8 Sept., 17 Nov. 1880, 14 Feb. 1883, 27 May 1885, 19 Mar., 21 Oct. 1887.

49 *Preston Guardian*, 26 Mar. 1892, 16 June 1894.

50 Lancs. R.O., MBLS 5/3, membership of General Purposes Committee, Apr. 1894.

secured the financial provision for a wide range of public amenities in a programme whose cost ran to £40,000.⁵¹ The first priority was a main sewer, followed by the adoption of the south promenade from the Land and Building Company, laying out pleasure gardens, and widening the resort's principal thoroughfare, St Annes Road. Moreover, despite stern opposition from the estate, the new urban district council, as it became in 1894, equipped itself with the powers to regulate building development in the town, including control over street plans, elevations, building lines, conversions, fencing, and so on. Indeed, within the space of a few years, virtually every amenity in the resort had fallen under the control of a council which had a bold vision of its municipal role. In 1895 it combined with other coastal authorities in the joint purchase of the Fylde Waterworks Company. The following year it negotiated purchase of the local gas company. In 1897 an application for loan capital was made under the Electric Lighting Act, and in 1898 a loan of £2,500 was raised to extend the promenade.⁵²

Enterprising as St Annes' council was, its belief in the value of municipal intervention was kept firmly in check by 'the perennial Victorian impulse to economy'. Among the ratepayers this impulse seems to have been at its strongest when the interests of the town and those of the estate overlapped.⁵³ In view of the way in which the estate had distanced itself from the problems which had plagued the resort in its early years, it is not altogether surprising that subsequent relationships operated on a largely cold and formal level. There was obvious reluctance to spend public money in ways that would be financially advantageous to the estate. It reduced the geographical reach of its sewerage scheme in 1900 because the original scheme would also serve to open up building land on adjoining Clifton property.⁵⁴ In

51 Ibid. DDC1 (1966 deposit), copy of St Annes Improvement Act, 59 & 60 Vic. c. 248 (Local and Personal); *Preston Guardian*, 20 Aug. 1892.

52 Lancs. R.O., MBLS 5/3, General Purposes Committee minutes, 25 Mar., 19 July 1895, 31 Aug. 1896, 5 July 1897, 31 Aug., 3 Oct., 30 Nov. 1898.

53 Walton, thesis, p. 211.

54 Lancs. R.O., MBLS 5/3, General Purposes Committee minutes, 16 May 1900; *Preston Guardian*, 2 June 1900.

1902 the council rejected the 'gift' of 13 acres of Clifton land for a public park because of a stipulation that it would have to make provision for a surrounding road and sewerage system into which any future housing would be allowed to connect.⁵⁵

The final battleground centred on control over the foreshore. In the past the estate had vigorously guarded its right to determine the uses to which the promenade was put. 'Joy wheels, Aunt Sallys, cheap jacks, stalls and pleasure fairs' had always been strictly prohibited on the grounds that such unseemly activities would deter building development on adjoining land. By contrast the council took a less puritanical view. Not only was the principle of municipal self-determination at stake here but envious glances were cast in the direction of Southport, where promenade amusements had made a significant contribution to the municipal coffers. Ultimately the Improvement Act of 1914 equipped the council with the means of removing the last vestiges of estate control over the town's affairs.⁵⁶ Despite the landowner's petition against the Bill, the council secured powers of compulsory purchase, and it then went ahead with plans for not only ornamental gardens and marine lakes but 'pavilions, booths, stands and stalls'. This episode was in effect a final snub to an estate whose attitude towards St Annes had been one of remorseless profit-taking: 'privilege without responsibility', as one St Annes resident acidly remarked on an earlier occasion.⁵⁷ In the end St Annes survived and prospered despite the landowner and not because of him. Its survival also helped to rescue the estate's ailing finances but at the price of a shattered public image.

In terms of the relationship between town and estate there are interesting similarities between Lytham and St Annes over the last quarter of the century. In Lytham the relationship turned on a shift in emphasis in the way in which the estate managed its urban property. The benevolent paternalism of earlier years and the accent on social controls gave way to

55 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), memoranda: Clifton Park, St Annes, 21 June 1902.

56 Ibid. St Annes Improvement Act, 1914, 4 & 5 Geo. V, c. 161 (Local and Personal); J. S. Fair to Col. Drummond, 28 July, 17 Nov. 1913.

57 *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 25 May 1900.

much more basic financial considerations. If the town could be encouraged to expand, the prospect of steadily increasing ground rents offered the possibility of shoring up the estate's crumbling solvency. At the same time, such a policy eventually placed the Cliftons in an altogether new light in their relations with the town. As was the case in St Annes, Lytham's leading citizenry was increasingly prompted into asking the basic question whether the interests of the town and the estate were necessarily one and the same thing. However, injecting new vigour into the resort was not easy. Lytham's development from the 1840s had been far from impressive. With a population of about 3,200 in 1871, the town was little more than a large village.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, a policy of encouraging growth also pointed in the direction of relaxing direct controls. The first large-scale developers were invited on to the estate in a departure from the customary practice of leasing small plots to private individuals. In 1879 a consortium of east Lancashire businessmen formed the Lytham Land and Building Company, which took out an initial lease on 30 acres in the Ansdell district between Lytham and St Annes.⁵⁹ On a much larger scale a Fleetwood-based company in 1892 leased 260 acres and began work on what became the exclusive residential suburb of Fairhaven. Leases were revised in line with these developments when the first 999-year leases were granted in 1886, and from 1890 onwards expired leases were renewed on the same terms but at considerably higher ground rents.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the prospects for success rested largely on providing a standard of amenity and quality of environment likely to attract new residents and inward investment. Typically, the focus of attention was the town's 'sanitary condition'. Behind an imposing façade of villa residences, hotels, and assembly rooms lay an uninviting world of filth and squalor and the all too visible reminders of Lytham's agricultural past. The Medical Officer's report of 1874 did

58 *V.C.H. Lancs.* I, p. 333; *Mannex's Directory of Lancashire* (1866); Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), Lytham survey, 1867.

59 *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 16 Apr. 1879.

60 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), surveyor's report on Clifton estate, 1890; *ibid.* Lytham leases; *Preston Guardian*, 23 July 1892, 4 Apr. 1896.

not augur well.⁶¹ The primitive sewerage system was faulty, the beach was contaminated by animal and vegetable waste, manure continued to accumulate in the back streets, and sanitary inspection was still inadequate. Lytham's sanitary record was not the only target. The local press assembled a catalogue of complaints and shortcomings from the mid-1870s onwards:⁶² Why was there no direct rail service to Preston? Why were the roads impassable in winter? Why the restrictive building regulations? Who would be prepared to take on building plots along unformed roads with no access to adequate drainage? The most burning question of all: Who was to pay for the remedies?

Rate-supported municipal enterprise was the solution advanced by recent newcomers to the town, especially those whose interests were most affected by the resort's lethargic growth: the more extensive property owners, lodging-house keepers, and the building trade. Inevitable comparisons were drawn between the energetic efforts of other seaside authorities and the 'penny-pinching' attitude of their own. Lytham Tradesmen's Association paraded the example of Southport's transformation or drew attention to the £60,000 which reputedly had been spent on public amenities at Rhyl, a resort no larger than Lytham. But the most telling contrast was made with neighbouring Blackpool, which 'lavishes thousands of pounds to catch the public [while] Lytham haggles over sixpence'.⁶³

Replacing an oligarchic Board of Improvement Commissioners by an elected, more energetic local board comprising 'men of enterprise [and] of enlarged views and aims' was consistent with the political strategy Thomas Fair had conducted in St Annes.⁶⁴ A more enterprising local board would be more likely to lend financial support to

61 Lancs. R.O., MBLS 3/2, reports to Nuisance Committee, Aug. 1865 to Aug. 1868; *ibid.* 2/6, report of Medical Officer to Sanitary Committee, 2 Mar. 1874.

62 *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 17 Feb., 24 Feb., 10 Nov. 1875, 6 May 1877, 15 Sept. 1880.

63 *Ibid.* 10 Feb., 17 Feb., 10 Mar., 29 Sept. 1875, 6 Feb., 13 Feb. 1878, 28 Jan., 15 Dec. 1880.

64 *Ibid.* 18 Sept. 1878.

improvement schemes than the obstructive and supine body of commissioners. But changing the structure of local government ran its own risks. In the opinion of the heir to the estate, it meant a dangerous political departure. 'It is a great thing to steer clear of elections', Clifton advised his agent, 'It has a tendency to engender parties which is not very desirable'.⁶⁵ Indeed, the newly elected local board of 1878 proved to be more factious than compliant. The more 'progressive' of the town's citizenry were not suddenly swept to power. The impulse towards economy still had to be reckoned with. In the board elections of 1880 the call for improvements was countered by equally vocal complaints that the board was acting under pressure and ratepayers 'saddled with an outlay which ought to fall on the owner of the land'.⁶⁶ There were some achievements to record, notably a start in 1882 on a £5,800 project to build new sewerage and gas works.⁶⁷ However, several factors conspired to prevent Thomas Fair from driving more impressive improvement schemes through the local board. Groups tended to realign over every issue of public spending. Projects which threatened to have a dramatic effect on the rates were always likely to drive wavering support into the ranks of the opposition. Crucially, the suggestion that the landowner stood to gain from the ratepayers had much the same kind of effect.

In mid-century few would have wished and even fewer would have dared to cast aspersions on the estate's motives. In the 1890s, by contrast, there was much more public debate about the estate's role in the town, and an even greater readiness to criticize and censure. Whereas in the past public comment on the estate's affairs and the behaviour of the landowner and his agent had been discreet and usually deferential, a growing body of residents and local board members were now unashamedly unrestrained in their comments on estate policy. Furthermore, another element had

65 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), Thomas Henry Clifton to Thomas Fair, 16 June 1876.

66 *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 15 Sept. 1880; Lytham's local board took office in Dec. 1878.

67 *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 11 Feb. 1880, 21 Jan., 29 Mar., 10 May 1882, 15 Dec. 1894.

entered the picture. Some of Fair's more vociferous critics had a political axe to grind, confirming the Cliftons' long-standing fear that a more open system of government would provide a stage for the politically antipathetic elements who had settled in the town. 'Some are more inclined to put their party scruples before the good of Lytham', Fair remarked.⁶⁸ In truth, it was no coincidence that the hard core of board members who doggedly resisted Fair's comprehensive improvement schemes were also leading members of Lytham's infant Liberal Association.⁶⁹ By 1894 the estate's political critics had become more daringly outspoken. The town's tradesmen, it was claimed, were unable to voice an opinion because of fears of reprisals. The board, they continued, was Tory-dominated and manipulated in the interests of the landowner: 'In Lytham they have not grown out of the old order of things. In the old days every cottage was owned by the estate and they thought by that means to control all of a labouring character and that the whole place would be exceedingly respectable'. The town needed more enterprising and energetic government 'provided it was free and divorced from the interests of the estate'.⁷⁰ All of Thomas Clifton's dire warnings were coming true.

As events turned out Fair's 'progressives' swept to victory in the local elections of 1894. Their success was due to a combination of factors. Measures to improve Lytham's poor image were needed more urgently than ever. It was a matter of some alarm that, by comparison, St Annes was attracting more building activity.⁷¹ But the formation of the urban district council and the division of the town into electoral wards tipped the balance of power in favour of the professional and manufacturing families who were largely sympathetic to the principle of rateable intervention. Nevertheless, the political influence of the estate office played its part. Never before had it made such efforts to canvass support and to cultivate an acceptable impression of the

68 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), Thomas Fair to J. Wilson, 4 Mar. 1893.

69 *Preston Guardian*, 31 Mar. 1880, 21 Mar. 1883.

70 *Ibid.* 5 Nov. 1892, 4 Feb. 1893; *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 2 June 1894.

71 *Preston Guardian*, 30 Apr. 1892.

landowner's role in the affairs of the town and of the generous contribution he had already made to the town's development.⁷² Outwardly, it appeared that the ties between the estate and the town had been mutually reinforcing. In fact the alliance between the town's 'progressive' leadership and the estate was based on temporary convenience. For the moment differences were buried out of a recognition that the resort's needs were more immediate and only public self-help could bring about any speedy improvement. But in committing the town to more expensive public works the 'progressives' became ever more critical of the landowner's contributory role rather than less so. In a sense the Cliftons had made a rod for their own back. They helped to bring to the fore men who were prepared to carry out the kind of improvements the estate itself could ill-afford. At the same time these same men would be satisfied with nothing less than the full control of municipal affairs. On this basis they drew a clear distinction between the town's interests and those of the estate.

The concerted action of 1894 thus turned out to be a brief honeymoon period which gave way to a more searching analysis of the landowner's contribution to the town's welfare. In the local elections of 1896 'progressives' were portraying the landowner not as the benevolent force of the past but as the beneficiary of their own success and that of the town. With thinly disguised hypocrisy they attacked the squire's continued absenteeism. They complained about the poor condition of the unadopted roads and accused the estate office of deliberately abandoning the building standards of the past in favour of more speculative profit-taking. One councillor made no bones about what he saw as a separation of interests and, on that basis, challenged the agent's ability to carry out his duties impartially as a town councillor.⁷³

Of course contested elections always have the effect of heightening emotions and giving rise to somewhat

72 Lancs. R.O., DDC1 (1966 deposit), Thomas Fair to J. S. Fair, 15 July 1894; *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 2 July, 7 July, 15 Dec. 1894; *Preston Guardian*, 11 July 1896.

73 *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 21 Mar. 1896, 9 Mar., 23 Mar., 30 Mar. 1900.

exaggerated claims. Nevertheless, it is apparent that political comment carried a strong measure of popular feeling. The criticism coming from various interest groups was no less restrained. The Lytham Tradesmen's Association in 1904 no longer felt the same common cause with the estate as had been the case ten years earlier. Their resentment was unmistakable. The landowner was not so much the creator and benefactor but the scapegoat for the town's unspectacular progress. Yet his only function was cast in terms of filling a largely decorative role. 'Perhaps if the Squire were to settle here and reside at Lytham Hall it would give an impetus to trade. It was the duty of the Squire to come and help the town . . . It was as little as Mr. Clifton could do to come and spend some of his money here.' The Ratepayers' Association voiced similar complaints, and public comment at a meeting called to discuss relief measures for the poor and unemployed of the town went further. The landowner's past record of benevolence came under scathing attack. Nothing could be asked or expected of a landowner, the platform asserted, whose previous acts of generosity had been inspired by naked self-interest. 'He gave a park to St Annes which they did not want and made over Lowther Gardens [in Lytham] to avoid the expense of maintenance.' A reduction in the estate's income from the town seemed to offer the best panacea for all social ills. Land reform was the answer. If ground rent values were appropriately rated then the burden on the town as a whole could be reduced, and more cottages built and leased at lower rents.⁷⁴

Not surprisingly, the tarnished reputation of the landowner provided the Liberals with a fund of political capital. The parliamentary elections of 1910 fuelled further accusations against the estate's leasing policy. Old scars were re-opened with the local press enjoying a field-day investigating 'Mr. Clifton's alleged misdeeds in respect of the renewal of expiring leases'.⁷⁵ By the turn of the century the town council had virtually severed the estate's controls over the most important areas of municipal responsibility. With rateable values climbing to over £64,000 the council had sufficient

74 *Lytham and Kirkham Times*, 12 Feb., 26 Feb., 16 Dec. 1904.

75 *Lancs. R.O.*, DDC1 1325, box 1.

independent means to remove the last vestiges of dependency. The most important aspect of the 1904 Lytham Improvement Act was not just the council's new borrowing powers but its claim, embodied in a comprehensive list of by-laws, to proprietary rights over the streets, parks, beach, and promenade.⁷⁶ In face of loud protestations from the estate office the Act overturned a former condition that by-laws were subject to the landowner's consent. The point had been reached when municipal pride could no longer be satisfied with a situation in which any future plans for the town depended on extracting approval from the estate. Power at the local level had shifted into the hands of the professional middle-class just as effectively as it had at the level of county administration. Lancashire County Council dispensed with the idea of a landed figurehead from the very outset of its creation.⁷⁷

There remained one final battle to be fought, and no single issue generated more public controversy or placed the matter of patrician power in sharper relief than the question of who controlled the town's schools. For the previous two hundred years education in the township had come under the aegis of a combination of trusts collectively known as the Lytham Charities. Their founding purpose was to provide a basic education for the children of poor families on a non-denominational basis. In practice this charitable trust was a source of landed patronage. By 1846 its board of trustees numbered not only the landowner, Thomas Clifton, but his agent, solicitor, and five of the major tenants on his estate, together with several rectors and patrons of local Anglican churches. In effect the Lytham Charities came to be dominated by an oligarchy of estate and Establishment which was to last until 1903.⁷⁸ Backed by a steadily mounting

76 4 Edw. VII, c. 155 (Local and Personal).

77 D. Cannadine, *The decline and fall of the British aristocracy* (London, 1990), p. 159; J. D. Marshall, 'The government of Lancashire from 1889: its roots and characteristics', in *The history of Lancashire county council, 1889 to 1974*, ed. J. D. Marshall and M. E. McClintock (London, 1977), pp. 3-22 at 11-12.

78 Lancs. R.O., DDX 103 (Lytham charities records), trustees' minute book, 1845-99; G. L. Wright, *The history of the Lytham Charities, subsequently called the Lytham Schools Foundation* (Preston, 1950), pp. 22-3.

income from their small but highly lucrative building plots in central Blackpool, the Charities maintained a dominant influence over education in Lytham. Controversially, however, it was an influence which the landowner-dominated board of trustees exercised conspicuously in favour of the Anglican schools.⁷⁹ Claims to a share of the funds by Nonconformist and Catholic groups fell on deaf ears. The trustees long maintained that they could not afford to dilute the Charities' resources by supporting any additional establishments. Yet, in 1883, they found themselves able to come to the assistance of St John's National school and there was no disguising the fact that a recently opened Wesleyan school, which succeeded in drawing twenty-four pupils away from the Charities' own establishments, played some part in shaping that decision.⁸⁰

These events triggered a growing demand for the complete reorganization of the town's educational provision. The trustees found themselves coming under pressure from a number of directions.⁸¹ The Nonconformist and Catholic groups were incensed by the Charities' denominational bias, and claimed entitlement to a share of the trust under the terms of the original foundation. The Catholic Church, it was argued, catered equally for the poor in the east end of the town, yet appeals to the trust for financial assistance had been repeatedly rejected. The dispute simmered on and a few concessions were wrung from the trustees: a meagre grant of £75 to the Catholic and Wesleyan schools in 1891, £200 per annum towards secondary education in Lytham, and £500 to build a new St John's school. But any attempt to break their control over the Charities' funds was firmly resisted. Scheme after scheme foundered on the trustees' stubborn refusal to relinquish control. By 1896 a third interest group had entered the fray. Under the Local Government Act, Lytham urban district

79 Lancs. R.O., RCLY 6/5, 7/5 (St Peter's Roman Catholic church), Revd J. Walmsley to J. Fair, 1846. When the charities were first established the Cliftons had refused to sell the trust any freehold land in Lytham. By 1903 the sale of the trust's Blackpool property had realized almost £36,500, producing an annual income of over £2,000.

80 Lancs. R.O., DDX 103.

81 *Ibid.* RCLY 6/4, Canon Taylor to Charity Commissioners, 20 June 1894.

council asserted its right to appoint to the board of trustees representatives equal in number to the existing membership, and in 1898 the Charity Commissioners conducted a public inquiry into the whole matter.⁸² The commissioners were in effect acting as arbitrators between the two main factions: the landowner and his nominated trustees on one side, and on the other a loose alliance of town councillors and non-Anglicans determined to remove landed influence from an important area of the town's life, which could only be achieved, as one Baptist councillor put it, by terminating the 'perpetual succession of Fairs'.⁸³ In fact their regime was brought to an end in 1903 by the Board of Education, which enforced a sweeping revision of Lytham's school system. Out of a board of fourteen the number of existing life-trustees was reduced to just two, and control over the Lytham Charities' funds became firmly vested in the hands of representatives from the local authorities. The sectarian character of the Charities' work was finally erased and much of the money was used for the purpose of establishing two grammar schools in the town.

For the Cliftons, these events effectively marked the surrender of patrician power and the eclipse of their former role as the political and social overlords of their urban domain. Their power had been real enough, but as the nineteenth century came to a close it was defended more by the diligence of the land agent than by the immediate concern of the landowner. His interest was more in the spending of wealth. It was left to his agent, and to a wife who held firm traditional views about the role of the landed order, to try and reconcile the need to maximize the financial return from the land with the preservation of patrician power. They partially succeeded in the first objective; the second led to oblivion.

The predicament with which the landed élite was faced at the end of the nineteenth century has been recounted elsewhere.⁸⁴ David Cannadine has argued that if there was a

82 Ibid. DDX 103.

83 Ibid. RCLY Sick Club minutes and accounts, charities correspondence, 1898.

84 Cannadine, *Decline and fall*; D. Cannadine, *Aspects of aristocracy: grandeur and decline in modern Britain* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1994), pp. 37–54; J. V. Beckett, *The aristocracy in England, 1660–1914* (Oxford, 1986), esp. pp. 468–81.

pivotal period in landed fortunes, it belongs to the closing decades of the century when adverse financial, social, and political circumstances converged to force the landed order into full retreat. The experience of this one estate demonstrates how the expansive confidence of the mid-Victorian years gave way to self-doubt and reassessment. Until the 1870s the Cliftons, like many of their counterparts both in the region and across the nation, were preoccupied with the extension and embellishment of their estates. They were active improvers as well as consummate spenders of wealth; they participated in the political affairs of the nation and exercised an unassailable supremacy over the lives of both their rural and urban constituents. All that had changed by the end of the century. In part, the problem was of their own making. Few could have competed with the level of financially crippling extravagance in which members of the Clifton family indulged themselves. The shift in managerial priorities towards the urban estate was an attempt to stave off financial disaster as the burden of debt, accumulated over the years through family encumbrances, land purchases and improvement, and reckless spending habits, eventually took its toll as it did on other estates.⁸⁵ But in seeking financial salvation in bricks and mortar the Cliftons succeeded only in accelerating the challenge to their own patrician power. Territorial decay, signalled by the disposal of agricultural land in the 1880s and 1890s, was not just a matter of financial prudence; it set the seal on a political and social retreat. Such was the fate of landed society as a whole.

85 G. Rogers, 'Lancashire landowners and the great agricultural depression', *Northern History*, XXII (1996), pp. 250–68.