

# ‘This land belongs to all of us’ Unemployment and the Leicester Landgrabbers, 1909

*Cynthia Brown*



*Landgrabbers at No. 1 Camp, Walnut Street. (From a copy of a postcard loaned to the author.)*

In November 1909 a group of unemployed men calling themselves ‘Landgrabbers’ occupied three areas of vacant land owned by the Borough Council in Leicester at Walnut Street, Sawday Street and Knighton Fields Road East, with the intention of founding ‘colonies’ on them: of cultivating the land and supporting themselves from what they could produce. Their protest was short-lived and failed to achieve their objectives, but it is revealing in terms of attitudes to unemployment in the Edwardian period and the limited means available for its relief. Arguably, it also offers some interesting insights into the nature of the Labour Party in Leicester following the election of Ramsay MacDonald as one of its MPs in 1906.

Many of the unemployed in Leicester in the early twentieth century were skilled men whose situation could not be dismissed in terms of a failure to be sober, industrious and self-reliant. The substitution of machinery for hand labour, particularly in the footwear industry, was a major factor in their plight. Leicester had ‘suffered more acutely than any other district by rapid introduction of labour saving machinery’, while the displacement of male by female labour was said to be another cause of ‘great distress’, encouraged by the adoption of lighter machinery. (1) The long-term unemployment that resulted from these changes was very different from the short-term ‘boom and bust’ cycles that characterised the hosiery and footwear industries, but it proved very difficult to address within the framework of government powers.

Charity remained an important source of relief for the ‘deserving’ poor, including the Mayor’s Unemployed Fund on which the Leicester Trades Council was represented. (2) Emigration to the colonies was also encouraged as a solution, reinforced by the many advertisements for ‘free land’ and a new life carried by local newspapers at this time. However, as the Liberal Alderman Edward Wood observed in 1905, charity had been ‘tried before’, and although emigration was a ‘useful factor... it was only the most able of our citizens that went abroad’. Relief was also available through the Poor Law, but so persistent was the stigma attached to it that: ‘Next to being sent to prison, the worst calamity that could befall a man was to be compelled to go to the workhouse’. (3)

While holding to the view that the Poor Law itself encouraged pauperism by ‘helping the drunkard and chronic loafer who wastes his earnings, neglects his family, and is devoid of all sense of parental or civic responsibility’, another Liberal member of the Council, Ald. Thomas Smith, also acknowledged that it ‘discouraged the industrious artisan, who through no fault of his own has become temporarily unemployed, and declines to accept help under conditions that destroy his manhood and disenfranchise him’. (4) Recipients of poor relief had their names removed from the electoral register for a year, and were also subject to a ‘Labour Test’ for relief outside the workhouse. This required them to carry out a ‘task of work’ each day to demonstrate that they were genuinely in need, often

consisting of work such as wood-chopping that was meaningless and unproductive in itself, so as not to compete with local industries.

The work provided by local authorities in Leicester otherwise consisted of the laying out or cultivation of land owned by the Poor Law Board or Borough Council - heavy work to which men used to working in hosiery or footwear manufacture were often ill-suited. The Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905 - the year in which around 500 unemployed footwear workers had marched from Leicester to London to petition the King (5) - went some way to extend the powers of local councils, enabling them to set up Distress Committees and provide temporary work 'of actual and substantial utility' for up to 16 weeks in one year. By 1908, however, when the Labour Party promoted a new Unemployed Workmen Bill in Parliament, it was generally acknowledged to be inadequate. One MP declared that 'the present position is impossible', quoting the opinion of a Distress Committee that it had 'altogether failed to benefit the class of persons specially aimed at'. (6) According to a petition from the unemployed to the Borough Council in Leicester in October 1909, around half of the 1461 men currently on the Distress Committee register had been on it since the beginning, and were permanently dependent on the Committee for work. (7)

'Back to the land' schemes were one of the other remedies for unemployment favoured at this time. Both Ald. Wood and Ald. Smith were among their advocates, along with Ramsay MacDonald himself, whose 1906 election address included assistance to 'get back on the land... [for those who] desire this'. (8) The Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908 enabled local authorities to provide plots for cultivation as a means of individual or family self support, but land, farm or labour 'colonies' were also promoted as a remedy for unemployment on a larger scale - not least in sorting the 'loafers' from those who genuinely wanted to work. The land, Ald. Smith said in 1905: 'is not cultivated up to its highest capacity... its cultivation is healthy, stimulating, educational, generally restores lost efficiency, and will find work for the unemployed without largely coming into competition with other labour'. (9)

A conference at the Town Hall in December that year had considered a proposal for one such colony to 'assist the Distress Committee to carry out its duties', but it had still to materialise by November 1909 when the Leicester Landgrabbers took matters into their own hands. The first meeting of the No. 1 Landgrabber Camp Organising

Committee took place at 65 Dover Street on 7th November 1909, when it voted to 'empower the unemployed to proceed to the Corporation and obtain tools, agricultural implements etc. for the purpose of erecting shelters and cultivating vacant land' [sic]. (10) It was not an isolated campaign however, but one in a series of 'land-grabbing' episodes across the country since 1906. In July of that year Landgrabbers took possession of glebe land at Holy Trinity Church in Hulme, Manchester and established a 'Pioneer Camp' there. Their eviction in August that year, reputedly accompanied by the 'ruthless destruction of the camp and clearance of the crops', led to them 'uttering fiery denunciations' against the Rector, Rev. Henry A. Hudson, and accusations of 'Church against the People'. (11)

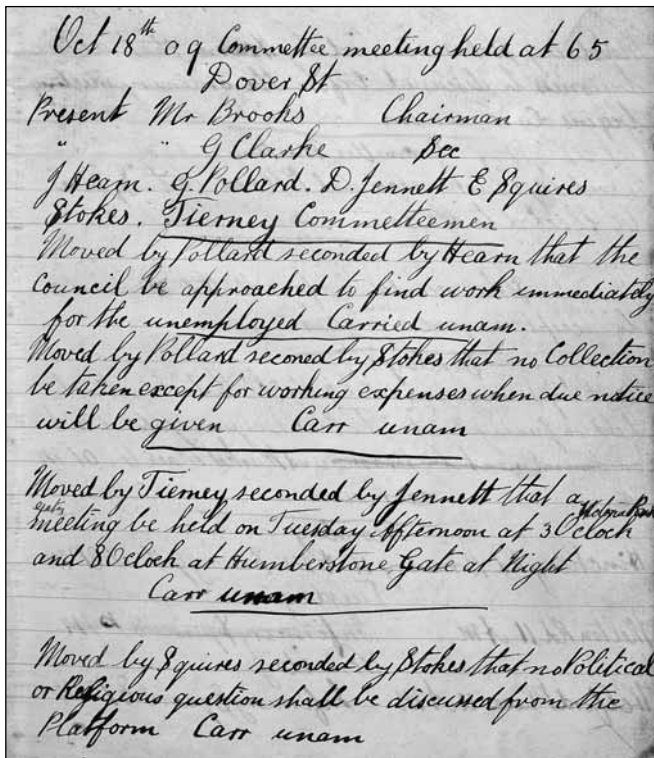
In the same month Landgrabbers at Plaistow in West Ham established the 'Triangle Camp', and reportedly set about cultivating it 'with a will... instead of the 14 who were digging Friday there were 30 on Saturday... they had arranged for cabbage-plants to be sent to them, and these would be planted in the land... [which] had already been cleared and marked off'. (12) Towards the end of the month, West Ham Town Council voted to take steps to recover possession of the land, a decision that caused 'intense excitement in the neighbourhood... more than 3000 people gathered... and bade defiance to the authorities...'. (13) At the end of August 1906 a small group of men, described as 'professedly unemployed', also occupied land acquired by the Corporation in Liverpool for a public recreation ground. Meeting at midnight, they 'erected their tent in the moonlight, and yesterday commenced digging'. (14)

'The Leicester unemployed have followed the example of their unfortunate brothers in Manchester and other parts of the country', the *Leicester Chronicle* reported in November 1909:



*The Pioneer's response to the request from Mayor Charles Lakin in 1908 for ideas about how to deal with unemployment, Leicester Pioneer, 28th November 1908. (With thanks to Ned Newitt.)*

... and have seized a piece of land with the intention of founding a colony on it. The land in question adjoins Walnut-street, and belongs to the Corporation. For some considerable time past the unemployed of the town have felt that if their demands for work were to have any effect, their protests must take a much more concrete form than hitherto. They contend that the land belongs to the townspeople, inasmuch as it is the property of the Corporation, and they make no secret of their ideas on this matter, for on a post they have nailed a placard with the following inscription: "Whose land is this? This land belongs to all of us". (15)



Record of the first meeting of the Organising Committee of No. 1 Camp Landgrabbers, Walnut Street. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, location mark MISC 118.)

The timing of their action was significant. For some years the Independent Labour Party in Leicester had been gaining ground on the Liberals on both the Borough Council and the Poor Law Board. In 1902 it had two seats on each body, increasing its representation on the Council to 11 in 1906 and to 16 on the Board of Guardians in 1907. Labour members of the Council at this time included Ald. George Banton, a former President of the Leicester Trades Council, Cllr. Amos Sherriff, one of the leaders of the march of unemployed footwear workers to London in 1905, and Cllr. J. K. Kelly, who was also a Poor Law Guardian. Three more seats were gained from the Liberals in the municipal elections early in November 1909, giving Labour 12 in total, alongside the Conservatives with 19 and the Liberals with 25. (16) The relief of unemployment was one of the issues central to its claim to be the only party to truly represent the

working man; but if the Landgrabbers had expected to secure concessions from the Council as a result, they were to be disappointed.

When the Council was asked to receive a deputation, one Liberal Councillor, John Hurley, asked: 'What party do they belong to? ... I think we know the legitimate portion of the unemployed and the Labour Party, and I don't know that the Labour Party, as we know them, recognise them'. (17) There was a perception that their actions had been orchestrated by outside 'agitators', notably the Manchester-based activist Stewart Gray, who had abandoned a successful career as a lawyer in Edinburgh to campaign against unemployment and poverty. Described as 'one of the most picturesque figures among the great army of England's unemployed', in February 1908 he had embarked on a fast outside Windsor Castle, after an unsuccessful appeal to the King for permission for a group of unemployed men to cultivate part of Windsor Great Park'. (18) He was in Leicester at the time of the Landgrabbers' campaign, but the Labour newspaper, the *Leicester Pioneer*, concluded after interviewing him that he was 'by no means a noisy agitator making a living by stirring up strife... he is genuinely stirred with a desire to bring the people back to the land... Tall and distinguished-looking... with long hanging hair... there is nothing of the poseur about Mr. Gray... he is merely a generation before his time.' (19)

The Council, however, refused to admit him, and the Landgrabbers' case was put by Dennis Jennett, the son of a professional boxer, who was Organising Secretary for No. 2 Camp at Sawday Street. According to the *Pioneer*, Jennett had been displaced from his employment, in which he had earned 35s. a week, by a man paid 20s. a week who had volunteered to take his place for 28s. Offered the alternative of accepting a reduction to 30s. or leaving, he 'preferred to go'; but he had been unable to find other employment and 'was reduced to applying to the labour test'. (20) After establishing his credentials as a 'Leicester man', he said:

He would rather go to the House of Correction than to the Workhouse, for at the House of Correction one was treated as a man. As a protest, the men had made up their minds that they would not go to the Workhouse, or register their names at the Distress Committee, knowing how hopeless their case was. The unemployed had come to the conclusion that the only way to solve the unemployed problem was to solve it themselves... The speaker described the labour test as an abominable and degrading system... he wished to remind them that while the grass was growing the horse was starving. The men were not clamouring for themselves, but for their wives and children. "I want to live", continued Jennett, "I don't want to die by slow starvation... I am not going to die by slow starvation; I am speaking for other men who have no spirit"... (21)

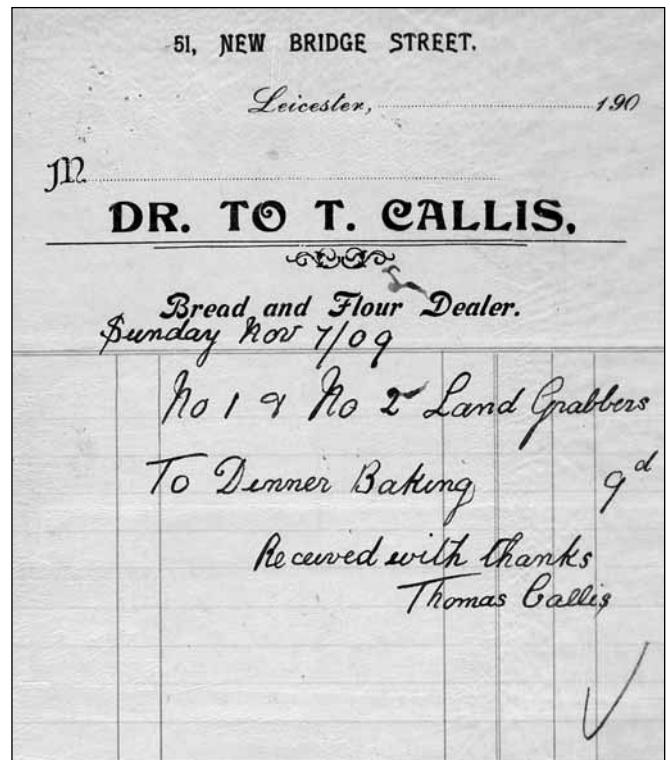
The Mayor, the Conservative Cllr. Chitham, replied that ‘he had no doubt that the Council would take what steps they could to arrive at some conclusion with a view to helping the men in some form or another...’. There the exchange ended. However, it did agree to hold a meeting of the Open Spaces Sub-Committee of the Distress Committee to consider the Landgrabbers’ position. (22)

The police kept a ‘watchful eye’ on the camps, but by contrast with local authorities elsewhere, the Council made no attempt to reclaim its land. Its restraint no doubt owed something to the degree of public sympathy and practical support the Landgrabbers had attracted, some of it recorded in the *Minute Book* of the No. 1 Camp. This lists donations of food including 15 loaves from Frears bakers; three plum cakes from Mr Sampson of Havelock Street; a leg of mutton from Mrs Hensman of New Bridge Street; 2lb tea and 12 tins of meat from Mr Barrs of High Street; and 30 bloaters from ‘A Friend’. The men also raised money through collections and the sale of postcards and pamphlets, including *The Political House that Jack Built*, the parody of the popular nursery rhyme written after the Peterloo Massacre in 1819. (23)



*Dennis Jennett. In the early 1920s Jennett was active in the Islington Unemployed Council. He is pictured here during his arrest in January 1921 after leading a raiding party which intended to seize Islington Town Hall. (With thanks to Ned Newitt for providing this image.)*

These funds were deposited for safekeeping with William May, a newsagent of 8 Dover Street who acted as the No. 1 Camp Treasurer. Some of the money was expended on picks and shovels, or paid to the men ‘as wages’. Other items of expenditure included ‘To Dinner Baking 9d’, coal, and two gallons of paraffin, a reminder that the weather was on the side of the Council rather than the Landgrabbers. (24) Earlier Landgrabber camps had been established during the summer months, but those in Leicester had to contend with ‘inclemency of the weather’ and the prospect of the winter ahead, protected only by mud shelters covered by a tarpaulin. It is also clear from the Landgrabbers’ records that there was a certain amount of discord within their ranks about how the camps and the campaign should be organised, as well as conflict between local men and those who had come to Leicester for the protest from elsewhere.



*Invoice for dinner baking for No. 1 and No. 2 Camps. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, location mark MISC 118.)*

At a meeting on 9th November at No. 2 Camp, for instance, it was agreed that the No. 1 and No. 2 Camps would have their own secretaries and committees ‘to work on their own ideas’, and that ‘only Leicester men should fill the three Head Offices’ of President, Secretary and Treasurer. Those appointed to these offices for No. 1 Camp were Mr Brooks of 24 St. James’ Street (President,) G. Clarke of 65 Dover Street (Secretary), and Mr May as Treasurer. It is otherwise difficult to know from the names in the *Minute Book* which of the Landgrabbers were ‘Leicester men’ or ‘more recently arrived’. (25) They do not appear in local trade directories, and where addresses were given – possibly of lodgings – they appear to have moved on by the time of the 1911 Census. One exception is George Pollard, aged 39, ‘a comparative new-comer to the town’ (26), who in December 1909 was convicted of using threats against a fellow Landgrabber, Albert Cramp. ‘TROUBLE IN THE LAND GRABBERS CAMP’, the *Leicester Chronicle* reported on 4th December 1909, followed by a graphic account of an alleged attack by Pollard on Cramp and another man at No. 3 Camp on Knighton Fields Road East. The Landgrabbers, said Cramp, ‘did not recognise any leader’:

but Pollard was general organiser... [He] came to the hut, and said: “If you don’t come out, I’ll bash your brains out with this piece of wood”. At that time witness was under the shelter which had been erected by him and Roslyn. Witness got up to put on his boots, but before he could do this Pollard knocked down the hut on the top of witness’s head... defendant picked up

a five-foot post, but witness just managed to avoid the blow... A number of convictions were proved against the prisoner. He had been convicted for assault, for using words calculated to cause a breach of the peace, begging in the Market-place, and deserting his wife and family. (27)

This attack was apparently provoked by Cramp asking to see the accounts for the camp, 'because they had been three days without food, and they knew there was 8s.6d. in hand'. The adverse publicity that it generated was compounded by the admission of Mr A. Callard, the No. 3 Camp secretary, that 'he had done no regular work for seven years', and his claim - greeted by laughter in court - that he had come to Leicester in the previous May 'for the benefit of my health... Leicester was recommended to me by the house surgeon of the London Hospital I was in'. Pollard was bound over in the sum of £10 and one surety of £10 to keep the peace for six months, and an order was made for costs or one month's imprisonment in default. 'Why not make it £50', he retorted: 'I'll go to prison'. (28)

It might be expected that the Liberal press, as represented here by the *Chronicle*, would exploit this opportunity to discredit the protest; but the Landgrabbers were clearly too radical for the Labour Party as well. Donations of three gallons of potatoes and 6d. from two Labour Councillors are listed in the *Minute Book*, but this appears to be the extent of its support. (29) The *Pioneer's* first report on the seizure of the land described it as 'a small sensation', while the editorial a week later wrote of the 'hope, however faint' inspired by the injection of 'new blood' into the Council by the municipal election. The Landgrabbers themselves were described as desperate men who have forced themselves on public attention during the last few days... the small knots of haggard-looking men who hung about the approaches to the Town Hall, on this day of ceremonies and high feasting, could not but cast a shadow over all the other events...'. (30)

This was the last time the *Pioneer* reported on the protest, and given that other local newspapers continued to cover the story, it has the feel of a deliberate omission rather than an oversight. Three by-elections were pending later in November, and there was clearly some concern that the adverse publicity generated by the Landgrabbers would undermine public sympathy for the unemployed in more general terms. (31) Nor was there any doubt, as the Town Clerk told the Council meeting in November 1909, that their actions were 'grossly illegal', (32) but illegality alone cannot explain the distance that the Labour Party apparently wished to put between itself and the Landgrabbers. As the *Pioneer* itself pointed out, several 'eminently respected' citizens of Leicester had broken the law in protest against compulsory smallpox vaccination and State funding for denominational schools under the 1902 Education Act. (33) Such actions were well within the radical political tradition for which

Leicester was widely known, as a major centre of Chartism in the 1840s, of co-operation, secularism and radical trade unionism, republicanism and anarchism, and the march four years earlier of unemployed footwear workers to London. (34) The Labour party had fought the local Liberals on the very issues that the Landgrabbers themselves were putting before the public - so how is its reluctance to openly support their cause to be explained?

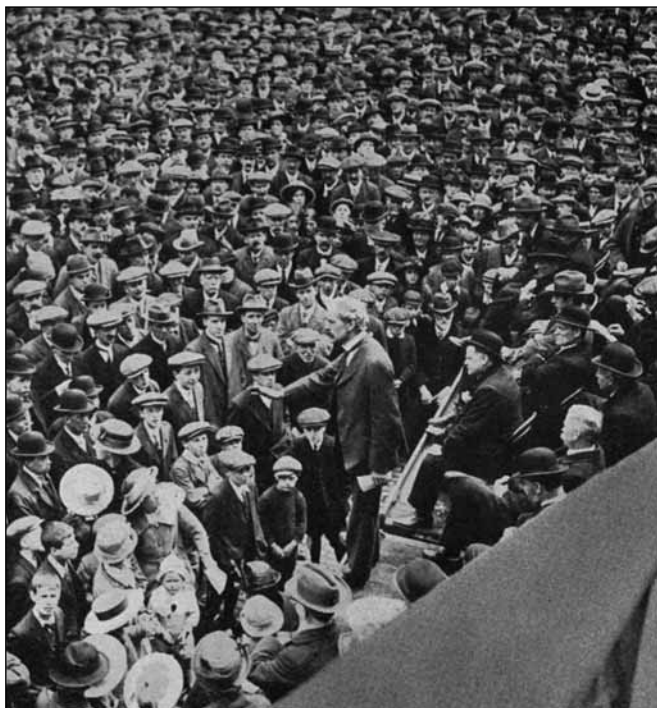
As Bill Lancaster has argued in his study of radicalism, co-operation and socialism in Leicester, the party in Leicester was in a period of transition following the election of Ramsay MacDonald and 28 other Labour MPs to Parliament in 1906, which arguably dictated the direction in which it must now go in the cause of political credibility and 'electability'. It 'possessed a Janus face'. On the one hand it remained 'a product of a specific local political tradition deeply entrenched in, and taking direction from, issues rooted in the local community'. On the other, 'the party with MacDonald at the helm appeared to prefigure the future process of bureaucratising and centralising Labour politics', particularly as its representation on the local Council continued to increase. (35) There is a hint of this at the Council meeting in November 1909, at which Ald. Banton reported that:

he had suggested that 'the "land grabbers", as they styled themselves, should wait upon him as Chairman of the Distress Committee and the Chairman of the Estates Committee, on the previous morning, but the deputation did not attend. He thought this would have been the way in which they should have acted. (36)

The Landgrabbers' actions were perhaps not without some influence, even so. Later that year the Council resolved not to adopt any more labour-saving machinery in its own departments until such time as alternative employment could be found for those displaced by it: an 'understandable definite policy' greeted with applause. (37) And in a by-election in 1913, when the National Executive of the Labour Party decided not to field a candidate against the Liberals in line with the electoral agreement made in 1903, the local party proposed to field a candidate of its own. MacDonald threatened to resign his seat and they retreated - but the spirit of local radicalism had not yet been entirely suppressed. (38)

The introduction of a national scheme of Labour Exchanges in 1909 went some way to address the difficulty the unemployed faced in finding work without ready access to information about vacancies. Unemployment itself was all but eradicated for the period of the First World War, and in 1918 Ramsay MacDonald lost his seat in Leicester, mainly as a result of his pacifist views. When unemployment returned with a vengeance in the inter-war period however, the same issues about its relief resurfaced with it. 'Back to the land' schemes once again featured in the proposed

remedies, including the Homesteads for the Unemployed at Birstall promoted by the Labour stalwart Amos Sherriff in the 1930s. (39) They made little impact on the mass unemployment of the time, serving only to reinforce the plea of the Distress Committee in Leicester in 1909 for greater state intervention to address the ‘constantly recurring distress from unemployment... [for] the problem has been shown to transcend the powers and opportunities of any one merely local body’. (40)



Ramsay MacDonal addressing a meeting in Leicester Market Place. (East Midlands Oral History Archive.)

#### References:

1. Ald. Edward Wood, *Leicester Pioneer*, 9th December 1905.
2. *Leicester Chronicle*, 13th February 1909.
3. *Leicester Pioneer*, 9th December 1905.
4. *Leicester Daily Post*, 29th August 1905.
5. See Jess Jenkins, *Leicester's Unemployed March to London 1905*, (Friends of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, Occ. Papers No. 2, 2005) for an account of the march.
6. P. W. Wilson, MP for St Pancras South, *Hansard*, HC Deb. 13th March 1908 vol. 186 cc.10-99.
7. *Leicester Pioneer*, 30th October 1909.
8. *Leicester Pioneer*, 6th January 1906.
9. *Leicester Daily Post*, 29th August 1905.
10. Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, MISC 118, *Minute Book of Organising Committee of No. 1 Camp, Walnut Street Landgrabbers, and receipted bills, 1909*.
11. *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 17th August 1906.
12. *Aberdeen Journal*, 16th July 1906.
13. *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 27th July 1906.
14. *Dundee Courier*, 1st September 1906.
15. *Leicester Chronicle*, 6th November 1909.
16. *Leicester Pioneer*, 6th November 1909.

17. *Leicester Chronicle*, 13th November 1909; *Leicester Daily Post*, 10th November 1909.
18. *New York Times*, 1st March 1908. The newspaper also reported that, when the authorities at Windsor Castle ‘offered to pay Gray’s fare back to Manchester... he shook several gold sovereigns at the official... and explained that he personally was not short of funds and suggested the money offered him be given to the poor’.
19. *Leicester Pioneer*, 13th November 1909.
20. Ibid.
21. *Leicester Daily Post*, 10th November 1909.
22. Ibid.
23. ROLLR, MISC 118 op. cit. One of the Frears family, John Russell Frears, was a Liberal member of the Council at this time, and the company regularly advertised in the *Pioneer*, claiming that ‘32,000 of the People of Leicester are supplied every day with Frears bread’.
24. Ibid.
25. Among the members of the Committee were J. Hearn, 2 Back of 115 Sherrard Road; W. Stokes, 135 Curzon Street; and J. Tierney, 79 Charnwood Street. Other ‘Men on the Land’ included S. Horner, 16 Saffron Hill Road; William Hall, 102 Leire Street; J. E. Billington; and P. Benfield.
26. *Leicester Pioneer*, 13th November 1909.
27. *Leicester Chronicle*, 4th December 1909. Pollard was sentenced to six weeks’ imprisonment in 1906 for assaulting a council official at the Triangle Camp at Plaistow (*Nottingham Evening Post*, 3rd September 1906). He was described by the *Chronicle* as a miner, and by the *Luton Times and Advertiser* (3rd December 1909) as ‘the well known socialist who lived in Luton for some years, and while here was the “leader” of the “Hunger Marchers”...’.
28. *Leicester Chronicle*, 4th December 1909. However, the *Pioneer* reported on 4th December that his fine had been paid.
29. These were Cllrs. J. W. Murby and J. K. Kelly respectively.
30. *Leicester Pioneer*, 13th November 1909.
31. All three seats were won by Labour. In a sermon at Holy Trinity church in December 1909 the vicar, Rev. F. Papphill, asked his congregation ‘not to say “I don’t believe in the unemployed, they are Socialists, thrifless, extravagant, loafers; a set of men who won’t work – land-grabbers and the like”... There were 1000s of genuine unemployed, some whom they would never expect to be in need...’ (*Leicester Chronicle*, 11th December 1909).
32. *Leicester Daily Post*, 10th November 1909.
33. *Leicester Pioneer*, 13th November 1909.
34. See, for instance, Bill Lancaster, *Radicalism, Co-operation and Socialism: Leicester working-class politics 1860-1906*, (Leicester University Press, 1987).
35. Ibid, p.xviii.
36. *Leicester Chronicle*, 13th November 1909.
37. *Leicester Chronicle*, 20th November 1909.
38. See J Pasiecznik, ‘Liberals, Labour and Leicester: the 1913 by-election in local and national perspective’, *Transactions of Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 63, (1989), pp.96 – 104.
39. See Cynthia Brown, ‘Hope Against Hopelessness: Leicester’s Homesteads for the Unemployed’, *Leicestershire Historian*, 49, (2013), pp.33-40.
40. *Leicester Chronicle*, 20th November, 1909.