

CONCLUSION: CHANGED LANDSCAPES, CHANGED LIVES.

In his publication *Social Unrest and Popular Protest in England 1780-1840*, J.E. Archer provided an excellent review of past research linked to the period covered by this present study, particularly in relation to agricultural protest, food riots, policing and law enforcement. He also confirmed the fact that most research on agricultural labourers has been largely confined to the south and south-east of England and called for research into other counties, even if these proved to be preliminary studies.¹ This study has taken a number of themes dealt with in detail by past research and looked at them holistically in order to determine their impact on agricultural labourers in Worcestershire. The findings, to some extent, reinforced other studies of rural deprivation, hardship and oppression.

By taking an holistic approach, however, this present study has highlighted important differences between Worcestershire and other rural counties with regard to enclosure, social unrest and popular culture. It has also highlighted some significant differences between individual parishes and the varying lives of individual agricultural labourers. This approach has also determined that agricultural labourers in Worcestershire were probably far less politicised than their counterparts elsewhere and shared a popular culture that was more likely to make them conservative rather than revolutionary. This may well explain why the Last Labourers' Revolt had so little impact on the county.

This author, however, also had the problem of drawing some more detailed conclusions together whilst knowing that the Worcestershire labourers' story continued after 1841 in ways significantly different from those found in this study. This was largely due to the fact that Chartism in general and O'Connor's Land Plan in particular had a significant impact during the 1840s, both nationally and in Worcestershire. John Belchem, for example, argues that the Land Plan facilitated an expansion of support for Chartism from agricultural labourers, whilst also noting that incendiarism in East Anglia between 1843 and 1845 indicated that traditional

¹ Archer, *Social Unrest and Popular Protest in England*: 94.

forms of protest were not necessarily displaced.² In Worcestershire, Chartism was particularly strong in Kidderminster and in 1846, the Kidderminster Co-operative Independent Land Society bought land in the parish of Wolverley and a small farm in the Wyre Forest, near Bewdley.³ Whilst this understanding gave some focus to the previous chapter, it was decided not to look in detail at Chartist land companies, so admirably dealt with in other publications, or the origins of agricultural trades unionism.⁴ These new forces, however, were to bring urban and rural labourers into a new relationship that was not evident in earlier decades.

To give an account of labourers' lives in Worcestershire between 1790 and 1841, however, has required a large canvas and tracking the impact of major social and economic changes across fifty years was inevitably problematic. Nevertheless, it was clear that by 1841 the landscape of the 1790s had changed significantly and most of the old open fields, commons and wastes had gone forever. Enclosure, however, had not been a uniform process and available evidence in Worcestershire indicated that it had more economic impact on the lives of freeholders and cottagers with common rights than it did on farm servants or agricultural labourers. Even at Inkberrow, where squatters had long since established themselves on the wastes, evidence suggested that by the time enclosure came in 1814, a growing population had long since devoured any 'free' resources, such as wood for kindling. Apart from several industrious cottagers and at least one labourer living on the Ridgeway who could afford to keep geese, the squatters, like many other parishioners, became increasingly reliant on poor relief, particularly grants of clothes, bedding and coals.

In Powick, freeholders fought hard and long to maintain their common rights on Powick Hams and had sufficient documentation to ensure that rights to pasture in the common fields were maintained until the end of the nineteenth century. The parish commons and wastes, however, were a different matter and by the 1820s,

² John Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New York: St.Martin's Press, Inc.,1996): 89.

³ Smith, *Carpet Weavers and Carpet Masters*: 240.

⁴ Alice Mary Hadfield, *The Chartist Land Company* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1970) gives an excellent account of the Worcestershire Chartist settlement at Great Dodford in 1849 and Nigel Scotland's *Methodism and the Revolt of the Field* (Gloucester: Allan Sutton, 1981) details the role played by Nonconformism in shaping rural trades unionism in East Anglia. For a more recent account of the Great Dodford settlement, see Diana Poole, *The Last Chartist Land Settlement. Great Dodford 1849*, The Dodford Society, Dodford, 1999.

two farmers were making significant encroachments from them in order to add to their existing properties. During the same period, the select vestry saw the wastes as an ideal dumping ground for poor families until overcrowding meant that it was impossible for more cottages to be built there. The select vestry also enclosed part of Old Hills Common and appears to have contracted out the right to gather furze to a local farmer, thus ending a significant common right. Old Hills Common was, however, some distance from most of the villages in the parish, so the loss of this right probably only affected those cottagers and labourers who lived close to the Common.

In time, however, many writers and historians saw enclosure and the loss of commons and wastes as symbols of the undoubted decline of the labourers' standard of living during this period. George Sturt came closest to the heart of the matter when he said that most local labourers initially accepted enclosure in a fatalistic way, not only because decisions were made over their heads, but because they probably did not understand the importance or significance of other changes taking place at the same time.⁵ Sturt believed that the commons symbolised the labourers' independence and offered the opportunity for an alternative form of income. Growing crops and raising animals on the commons also helped labourers develop skills in stock management and household economy. Without the commons, however, labourers could only be wage-earners and therefore increasingly subject to market forces.⁶ This thesis demonstrated that whilst Sturt's views on the significance of common land and 'peasant thrift' were partly illusionary, the hard reality was that most labourers did become wage-earners and wholly dependent on market forces. When food prices rose in Worcestershire, wages did not, but when prices fell, farmers usually cut wages accordingly. During this period there was also evidence of farmers in the county employing fewer servants and more day labourers, particularly after 1815. Wages remained relatively stagnant after the Napoleonic Wars and by the 1830s, if they could get away with it, farmers withheld payment if they were dissatisfied with labourers' work or tried to give labourers a lower rate than had been negotiated originally.

⁵ Sturt, *Change in the Village*: 85.

⁶ Sturt, *Change in the Village*: 85-89.

Agricultural labourers' lives became significantly dislocated between 1790 and 1830 by three factors that had far more impact than enclosure: economic fluctuations, population growth leading to increasing underemployment and unemployment and the risk of removal under the existing Acts of Settlement. Evidence in Worcestershire suggested that two of the three parishes chosen for closer scrutiny were more affected than the other and that from 1815 onwards growing unemployment in these parishes led to increasing poverty. Initially, local overseers responded by raising more money from the poor rates, whilst implementing other solutions, usually in accordance with existing legislation. It was important to note, however, that Inkberrow had a history of poverty going back to 1700. There, despite the best efforts of the clergy and overseers, poverty was never fully alleviated. As early as 1796, the Reverend William Heath blamed Inkberrow's poverty on the rapid increase in population and commented that:

Many of the natives, however, from deficiency of employment at home quit the parish and return only when poverty and infirmation of age oblige them to have recourse to their friends⁷

Managing a parish like Inkberrow, where poverty was the norm, was clearly a juggling act. The easiest solution was to persuade, or pay for, villagers to leave and overseers were happy to fund marriages that resulted in Settlement elsewhere or paid men to enter the army or the navy. Whilst some came back years later of their own volition, others were forced back under the Laws of Settlement when they became chargeable elsewhere. Eventually, however, Inkberrow's problems were partly resolved when industrial activity increased in and around nearby Redditch. After 1831, labourers began to move away voluntarily from the old squatter sites at Stock Wood and Stock Green into the main village of Inkberrow or the Ridgeway, the latter being close to the expanding needle factories at Astwood Bank. By the 1880s two-thirds of the cottages at Stock Wood and Stock Green had fallen into

⁷ Bradbrook, 'History of the Parish of Inkberrow', 469.

disrepair or had been demolished leaving no trace of the significant squatter and labouring population that had once lived there.⁸

It could be argued, of course, that Inkberrow's problems sprang from the fact that it was an 'open' parish and that its inhabitants shouldered an unnecessary burden in poor relief. Yet although poor rates rose in crisis years, there was no evidence that ratepayers refused to pay their rates or were reluctant to support their own poor. Whilst there were clearly tensions experienced with local farmers when parish overseers tried to regulate local employment, social relationships in Inkberrow appear to have been maintained and the Reverend Heath did not make any changes in respect of the Select Vestry Act. Although Byung Khum Song's study of Oxfordshire parishes (2002) has suggested that 'close' parishes supported a higher proportion of able-bodied poor than open parishes, and were more generous to them in terms of payments in kind, the situation in Worcestershire appears to have varied parish by parish and also depended on how parish overseers responded in times of crises.⁹

For instance, so far as Powick was concerned, evidence indicated that until the 'crisis' years of 1810-11 and 1815-20, agricultural labourers lived in a relatively prosperous parish with little evidence of significant unemployment and underemployment. The crisis years plunged many labouring families into poverty from which some never recovered. Unemployment and underemployment subsequently became a noticeable feature of parish life and significant rises in poor relief between 1815 and 1820 led to the select vestry adopting a harder attitude towards the unemployed, the poor and the needy. This attitude became increasingly harsher during the 1820s when numbers on relief rose from 42 to over 100 and payments soared from £908 a year in 1824 to £1312 for the year 1827-28.

Of the three parishes, Elmley Lovett was the most prosperous and a 'close' parish, but even here overseers also chose to adopt a harsher attitude to the poor in the 1820s. This may have led to the poor even being afraid to apply for relief, as

⁸ Bradbrook 'History of the Parish of Inkberrow', 468-469

⁹ Byung Khum Song, 'Parish typology and the operation of the Poor Laws in early nineteenth-century Oxfordshire', *The Agricultural History Review*, Vol.50, Part 2. (2002)

there were frequent records of ‘no claimants’ between 1824 and 1828. Certainly by the early 1830s overseers particularly resented making payments to individuals who were regarded as the undeserving poor and to elderly widows resident elsewhere. That said, there was little evidence of many removals from Elmley Lovett to other parishes and no evidence of any significant increase in the numbers of able-bodied unemployed or underemployed. Elsewhere, however, increasing numbers of agricultural labourers in Worcestershire found it difficult, if not impossible, to get relief in their place of residence after 1815 and many were removed back to their original Settlements or shuffled ignominiously between parishes if Settlements were challenged or ignored. The most vulnerable were those likely to be a high cost to the parish in question, particularly families with young children, pregnant single women, widows and the elderly. Moreover, most removals occurred in the autumn and winter, so that individuals and families were uprooted and transported to another village at a time of year when all parish relief systems were under maximum pressure. The misery of those removed and the resentment they experienced when they arrived in their designated place of Settlement can only be imagined.

The Oxford *Complete Wordfinder* defines ‘dislocation’ as ‘lives put out of order’ and labourers’ working lives during this period became increasingly unstable. Low wages and the growth of unemployment and underemployment inevitably meant that many Worcestershire labourers experienced years of fluctuating wages and subsistence living that sometimes involved periods of desperate poverty. Given this situation, it was not surprising that many turned to crime, often motivated by sheer necessity. This fact was recognised by local commentators and judges at the Quarter Sessions, especially from 1818 onwards. There was also evidence of some recourse to protest as a means of redress, often before or after harvest months, when anxiety was at its height and price rises at their most rapid.¹⁰ There was also evidence in Worcestershire that some criminal acts clearly fitted the modern concept of social or symbolic crime, provided one made a clear distinction between those whose motives involved an element of defending or asserting customary rights, as opposed to those who, for example,

¹⁰ McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England*: 305.

clearly poached for profit.¹¹ However, this thesis also supports Shakesheff's findings in his study of Herefordshire that social crime was more evident in the 1830s rather than in the years immediately prior to the Last Labourers' Revolt.

Given the economic distress experienced by agricultural labourers after 1815, it was surprising that there was not more evidence of social unrest in Worcestershire prior to and during 1830. Instead, evidence from the three villages chosen for this study suggested that because there was no discernible commonality of rural experience across rural parishes during this period, protest was not inevitable. Elmley Lovett remained relatively prosperous between 1790 and 1841 and, although a 'close' parish of three villages it was also close to the expanding carpet town of Kidderminster and to Droitwich, centre for the salt industry. This meant that there were other employment opportunities nearby and both towns were within walking distance. In his study of the Kidderminster carpet industry, Smith (1986) noted that the 1851 Census indicated that migration into the town was occurring, with those from rural areas particularly coming from villages immediately around the town, such as Stone, Wolverley and Hartlebury.¹²

The parish of Inkberrow, however, experienced major employment problems throughout the whole of the period and had a history of continuous poverty. Parish management here concentrated on relieving the poor and as well as persuading people to leave the parish, active steps were taken to provide employment with local farmers. In key periods of economic crisis the vestry tried to keep non-resident labourers out of the parish and ordered farmers to employ more local apprentices and labourers, imposing fines if they did not comply. Whether the vestry was successful or not may have been less important to local labourers than the fact that the clergy, churchwardens and overseers were perceived to be trying to help them. These perceptions and the experience of living for many years in a poverty stricken parish, however, may well have made Inkberrow labourers more tractable and deferential. This is in keeping with the behaviour of agricultural labourers elsewhere during this period.¹³

¹¹ McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England*: 216.

¹² Smith, *Carpet Weavers and Carpet Masters*: 198.

¹³ Reay, *Rural England*: 143-145.

Powick, however, was significantly different from Inkberrow, since there was evidence there of increasing social and economic tensions in the 1820s. Not only were there disputes over common land and common rights, but punitive measures were put in place to punish those seen as the ‘undeserving poor’. Yet although one of the stringent measures taken against the poor appears to have prompted the arson attack in 1827 on a wagon load of furze belonging to a hated overseer (also at the receiving end of several wood thefts) there was no evidence of any unrest at Powick in 1830 during the period when the Last Labourers’ Revolt had an impact elsewhere in Worcestershire. This suggested that local discontent in 1827 was personalised. One or more of a small number of cottagers or labourers living nearby probably took action because of the select vestry’s decision to enclose part of Old Hills Common and to give away their right to gather furze to a hated member of the vestry.

This thesis has sought to build on an earlier study of class and class-consciousness in two Worcestershire villages by exploring in more detail how popular culture in the form of songs, ballads and customary behaviour might have influenced some labourers’ social relationships and group behaviour.¹⁴ Although traditional beliefs, customs and practices may seem peripheral to some historians, they were central to the labourer’s world and hence of great importance to understanding the history of this group. Since many of these beliefs, customs and practices were essentially conservative, they were inhibiting factors that probably stopped the unrest of 1830 spreading further. It was interesting to note that although the authorities planned to put down any unrest in Worcestershire before it broke out, the published handbill of the landowners’ meeting at Evesham Town Hall on 29th November 1830 was, in many ways, a paternalistic appeal to the county’s labourers and aimed directly at their traditional values. In this leaflet, those inciting unrest in other counties were portrayed as seditious ruffians, whilst Worcestershire labourers were praised for their ‘good feeling and behaviour’. Landowners also pledged to employ their own labourers so that they might ‘earn a comfortable maintenance’ and be supported in times of poverty. In return, local

¹⁴ Maynard, ‘Class, Community and Social Relationships’.

labourers were asked to report every vagrant and suspicious character coming into their parishes to destroy 'those provisions which a merciful providence has given for their [labourers] Support'.¹⁵ Such an appeal was based on a spurious claim to mutuality that a politicised workforce would have seen through easily.

Most of the available evidence, however, suggested that until the 1830s there were still enough customary outlets for landowners and farmers to control labourers' potential aggression through the giving of gifts and tolerating popular sports based on aggressive physical activity. Agricultural labourers also had a calendar of rural celebrations and opportunities to solicit food or money, as well as innumerable ballads reflecting their taste for the bawdy, the sentimental and the melodramatic. In times of crisis, such as high price years, labourers also had their own traditional forms of protest in the form of arson, the threatening letter and ways of taking direct action over the high price of provisions. Importantly, they only used these extreme measures if driven to it and the usual outcome of any direct action was that the local gentry and others usually organised public subscriptions to lower the price of food as well as providing additional relief for the poor and needy.

There were, of course, other attempts by those at the top of village hierarchies to impose a more formal conditioning on rural labourers. At Inkberrow, for example, Sunday Schools were established in 1809 in both the main village and amongst the squatter community at the Ridgeway.¹⁶ Elmley Lovett could claim something better since it had two long-established schools, one at Elmley Lovett itself and one at Cutnall Green. But, although both Elmley schools were open to labourers' children, they were fee-paying and taught a limited curriculum of reading and writing, charging 1d per week per subject. Children also had to pay for their own books and one shilling a year for coal. Not surprisingly, the cost factor meant these schools attracted few labourers' children, but added to this was the grimness of the buildings themselves and the poor quality of teachers. The school at Cutnall Green, for example, was run by John Evans and the schoolroom had writing desks almost falling apart from decay. The grate scarcely held a fire and

¹⁵ BRO: MS3192/Acc-1941-031/269, Petition from owners and occupiers of land at Evesham to demand protection from violence, 29th November 1830.

¹⁶ WCRO: BA/18/10, Inkberrow, Select Vestry Minute Book: Minute of April 3rd 1809.

ink-bottles were suspended from bacon hooks attached to the ceiling. In the 1830s and 1840s the handful of labourers' sons attending were taught, reading, writing and arithmetic, but few got beyond basic understanding. They also attended irregularly and their parents were reluctant to send them.¹⁷

Most Worcestershire labourers, therefore, were more likely to be conditioned by traditional beliefs and customary practices than they were by formal education, but throughout the period in question such beliefs continued to be attacked and these attacks intensified after 1830. Although Tory magistrates showed some concern over labourers' unpaid wages, there was much evidence of clear disapproval of Sabbath breaking, village wakes, alehouses and traditional sports like prize fighting.¹⁸ Authorities elsewhere had similar attitudes. In 1833, for example, 16 parishes in South Oxfordshire petitioned Parliament for a stricter enforcement of the Sabbath¹⁹ and Billenge found much evidence of increased church building and evangelising in Wiltshire during the 1830s.²⁰ Whilst there was no evidence of renewed Anglican church building in Worcestershire, however, there were individual vicars who sought to influence labourers' behaviour through appeals to their employers. For example, in 1844, the Reverend G. Wharton's talk to the Stewponey Farmers' Club near Stourbridge was widely publicised because of his efforts to encourage farmers to pay attention to the moral condition of their workforce on the basis that labourers lacked, however, the ability to think for themselves. Putting Wharton's moral tone aside, his lecture was interesting because it suggested that by 1844 Worcestershire labourers' lives had not changed for the better. According to Wharton, labourers were poorly paid and poorly housed. Most lived in cottages which were small, dilapidated and unhealthy. Rents were high and few cottages had suitable gardens or, if they did, the gardens were too small to be of any use. Whilst cottages provided by larger landowners tended to be better than the rest, Wharton pointed to a marked growth in speculative cottage owners who not only built inferior cottages, but evicted labourers immediately if they failed to pay their rent on time. The job of farmers, Wharton argued, was to

¹⁷ Griffiths, *The Free Schools of Worcestershire*: 121.

¹⁸ See also Reay, *Rural England*: 137.

¹⁹ David Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces 1700 -1870*: 31.

²⁰ Billenge, 'Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire', 191.

provide better cottages, show more concern for the well-being of their labourers and provide better moral education for labourers' children.²¹

Eastwood (1997), however, has pointed out, that there was a religious alternative to the Church of England that had greater appeal for agricultural labourers and was more successful in its proselytising and moral conditioning. Indeed, it is likely that, over time, Methodism filled the vacuum created by the decline in popular culture. Methodists, unlike Church of England vicars, were prepared to hold meetings in village houses and barns and even sent ministers out to preach in fields.²² Primitive Methodism, however, was particularly evangelical and deliberately held 'camp meetings' at the same time as village festivals in a deliberate attempt to destroy traditional celebrations and save people from 'the wickedness of the neighbouring wake'.²³ Eastwood, however, suggested that both forms of Methodism took time to penetrate rural areas and this appeared to be the case in Worcestershire. Although there were Methodist circuits in the county by 1800, meetings were small, scattered and centred on the larger towns and villages. For example, in 1797 the Methodist circuit consisted of a base in Worcester and small meetings in Worcestershire and Warwickshire at Ombersley, Droitwich, Bromsgrove, Netherwood, Bengeworth, Honeybourne, Weston Subedge, Pebworth, Bidford, Priors Marston, Great Alne and Alcester.²⁴ The largest meeting at Bidford had 24 members, described as 'earnest, but ignorant and weak' and all other meetings were under 20 in number. Between 1800 and 1831, however, Wesleyan Methodists built 45 chapels in Worcestershire and a further 80 between 1831 and 1851. Most of these were for congregations established in the 1790s, but chapels were built for newer congregations at Stock Green (1834) Stoke Prior (1839) Leigh (1839) and Wyre Piddle (1840). By 1840 there were also Wesleyan meetings in village house at Childswickham and Wichenford. Other nonconformist churches also thrived during this period with new Baptist churches built at Defford (1825), Bricklehampton (1840), Eckington (1840) and Bishampton (1844). Congregationalist built at chapel at Childswickham in 1842 and there was an

²¹ WCRO: BA/3762/Foley Scrapbook 12c: 347 – 349. Account of a lecture by Rev G. Wharton 'on the best method of bettering the condition and increasing the comforts of agricultural labourers by the means as are in the power of the owners and occupiers of land.' October 1844.

²² Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces*: 32

²³ John Petty, *The History of Primitive Methodism* (London:1860): 23.

²⁴ John Noake, *Worcestershire Sects*. (Worcester: 1861): 317-318

Independent Chapel built at Leigh in 1831.²⁵ Although most congregations were relatively small (usually between thirty and seventy) the upsurge in Nonconformist worship and Methodism after 1830 may possibly have strong links with the continuing decline in popular culture and customary beliefs and the advent of a more moral society.²⁶ That said, there were still villages like Knightwick, Holt and Shrawley where there was no evidence of nonconformism and there were no chapels or meetings at Powick, Elmley Lovett or Inkberrow.

Given that all change is cumulative, the major social and economic changes that took place nationally meant that by 1840, Worcestershire labourers were living in a landscape significantly different from that of the 1790s and in a county where towns were increasingly separating themselves from the values and mores of the countryside. There was no evidence, however, that agricultural labourers became more politicised during this period or that any recognisable form of class-consciousness developed in rural villages; this came later. Landowners, magistrates and overseers of the poor appear to have maintained social control over the countryside, but the means by which they did so were on the wane. Payments in kind under the Old Poor Law disappeared rapidly after 1837 and although Tory magistrates occasionally demonstrated some sympathy for agricultural day labourers who were given insufficient relief by overseers, prison sentences still remained harsh and punitive for those who broke the law. More significantly, there was a general view in Worcestershire towns that rural areas needed more policing. General Marriott, a Pershore magistrate, believed more crime in the countryside would be brought to light if there were more police and Evesham magistrates complained of much crime being committed at fairs and on market days. They also expressed the view that rural villages had frequent disturbances after people had been drinking in beer houses.²⁷

The fact that the authorities sought to police rural areas and felt threatened by labourers meeting in beer shops, suggested that, by 1841, social control was

²⁵ WCRO: BA/10540, 1851 Ecclesiastical Census: Returns for Worcestershire.

²⁶ Reay notes a similar growth of Methodism in Kent during the late 1830s. Reay, *Rural England*: 165.

²⁷ BPP, *Crime and Punishment: Police, Vol.8, Session 1839-53, First Report 1839 of the Commissioners re establishing an efficient Constabulary Force*: 3.27-28.

weakening and that labourers' social behaviour was changing. Fear of the spread of Chartism was probably an element in the call for more policing, particularly as the movement was developing ideologies of interest to the rural labourer. How these new ideas impacted on those born later is best demonstrated through the autobiography of Jesse Shervington, a Worcestershire agricultural labourer.²⁸ Shervington's autobiography was interesting because he was brought up by parents whose experiences were conditioned by most of the changes that had taken place between 1790 and 1841 but who remained, for the most part, largely deferential. Born at Peopleton (near Pershore) on 8th November 1840, Shervington's father, John, was an agricultural labourer and his mother the daughter of the Peopleton parish clerk. Both parents were virtually illiterate, although Shervington's mother could read a little, but not write and his father could sign his own name. John Shervington was originally apprenticed to a shoemaker at Pinvin but left to become an agricultural labourer at Peopleton. There he met his wife, Nancy, and married her when she was only seventeen years old. By the 1830s John Shervington, in keeping with the times, was working on the Roundsman System at 1s a day, but in 1837 he became a carrier for *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, a job he held for twenty years. When his father-in-law died, John Shervington became parish clerk, having learnt all the responses by heart. Although he was not a religious man and sometimes slept during the services, it was a post he was to hold for 42 years.

Shervington's mother, Nancy, was religious, although the autobiography suggests she may have paid lip service to the Church of England. Jesse claimed that from 1843 his mother took him to secret ranters' meetings held in local barns and he clearly kept and read some of the tracts distributed there. The reason for this secrecy was not just that his father was the parish clerk, but also that the family had developed a particular antipathy to the local vicar, the Reverend George Dineley. Jesse himself accused George Dineley of being a tyrant who was always telling local labourers to 'order yourself lowly and reverently to your betters'. As a result of this antipathy, Jesse received only a basic education at a dame school in nearby Stoulton in 1848 rather than at the school in Peopleton and went on to another school at Bredicott in 1849. Like most labourers' children, he helped his parents at

²⁸ WCRO: BA/5518/2, *Autobiography of Jesse Shervington* reprinted from the *Baptist Banner*.

harvest from the age of eight, although this proved expensive because he broke his leg whilst working and this cost £2 to get re-set. Two years later, he started work as a stone picker at Badsey on wages of 4d a day.²⁹ Despite his father being in regular employment, the Shervingtons were undoubtedly poor, as were their living conditions. Their five-bedroom house had an earth floor (later it was lined with tombstones from the graveyard) and the upstairs rooms had no ceilings and were open to the thatch. This cottage was rented to them for 6d a week by the Reverent George Dineley, who also rented the family an allotment at 7s 6d a year. This might not appear unduly significant, except that Peopleton was a ‘closed village’ and part of a 1,400 acre estate bought by George Dineley’s Uncle Frederick in 1808. By 1820, the Dineley’s dominated village life with Francis Dineley as landowner, George Dineley as vicar and three other members of the family as farmers and dealers. The Dineleys, therefore, were both key employers and key moral arbiters in the life of the village. What, then, had the Dineleys done to provoke Jesse Shervington’s intense and lifelong antipathy?

The chief cause of Jesse Shervington’s discontent probably lay in the fact that his father was an allotment holder, one of 43 villagers renting a quarter of an acre plot from the parish. In 1849, the parish decided to lease the land to a Mr Ballinger, who proposed to raise the allotment rents from 7s 6d to 10 shillings a year. The church and parish, however, stipulated as part of Ballinger’s lease that no allotment holder could exchange plots in the future and plots were not to be worked on a Sunday. Should villagers do so they would lose their allotment.³⁰ To a family as impoverished as the Shervingtons, this was a triple blow. Not only did John Shervington have to find more rent, but he was also unable to trade his plot for a more productive one and was effectively banned from working it on the one day a week when he was not working as a carrier. As parish clerk, he was also in the invidious position where any disagreement would probably have led to his being made an example of if necessary. In effect, in Peopleton, allotments were being used as a means of controlling moral and social behaviour. Small wonder then that Jesse Shervington saw George Dineley as a petty tyrant. Nevertheless, antipathy to

²⁹ WCRO: BA/5518/2, *Autobiography of Jesse Shervington*: 4-8.

³⁰ WCRO: BA/5518/1, Peopleton Parish Book. See agreement relating to allotment holders, 22nd March 1849.

an individual does not automatically indicate antipathy to a class and Jesse Shervington was not opposed to the Church of England clergy per se since he had generous words to say about George Dineley's successor, the Rev. James Cook. A glance at Peopleton Parish Book indicated why. In 1855 Cook, as a new vicar, decided that the Holy Communion money should be distributed as alms to the poor and the Shervington family were regular recipients. John Shervington usually got a shilling a week and there were occasional payments to other members of the family varying from 2s 6d to 5s. Hence the subsequent debt of gratitude.³¹

Shervington was also born into a labouring group which still had a strong sense of popular morality, although, interestingly, most of his criticisms were levelled against landowners and clergy rather than farmers. So far as poaching was concerned, he was especially angry at keepers' attempts to trap labourers into crime by subterfuge. In particular, he cited an instance in his boyhood when he was on his way home with a group of men from stone picking at White Ladies Aston. At one point on their walk, the group passed the wood of a large estate and hanging down the bank was a dead hare. Despite warnings not to touch it, one of the group, William Reynolds, could not resist the thought of a free meal. As soon as he took the hare, a gamekeeper sprang out of his hiding place and arrested him for poaching. Reynolds subsequently received six weeks imprisonment in Worcester Gaol and his wife and child were forced to enter the workhouse as a consequence. Shervington's autobiography not only expressed his contempt for the magistracy, whom he called 'the great unpaid', but a residual of folk belief in his psyche also made him record that the gamekeeper eventually died the death of a wicked man with a smell of brimstone in the room at his passing.³² This antipathy to landowners, clergy and the Game Laws was also reflected in Shervington's volume of poetry published in 1907. His poem 'The Sporting Gentleman' attacked landowners and the Game Laws, while 'On Religions' attacked hypocritical parsons who failed to practice what they preached. In some unfinished poetry,

³¹ WCRO: BA/5518/1, Peopleton Parish Book. See alms entries 1855 onwards.

³² WCRO: BA/5518/2, *Autobiography of Jesse Shervington*: 12-14.

however, Shervington praised both Joseph Arch and Gladstone, thus indicating his support for agricultural trade unionism and Liberalism.³³

Nor was Jesse Shervington's experience unique. W.E. Adams' *Memoirs of a Social Atom* also contained recollections that tied in with the themes explored within this thesis. Born in 1832 and raised in Cheltenham, Adams' earliest memories included knowledge of attacks on popular customs made by Church of England clergy and how such customs declined subsequently. He also noted how tastes for popular literature and ballads began to change under the influence of nonconformism and of Chartism. By the 1840s, Adams recognised himself as belonging to a 'Chartist' family and whilst such identification might have been exceptional, there can be little doubt that there were a growing number of labourers committed to ensuring that their children, from an early age, shared their beliefs.³⁴

Although these autobiographies lay beyond the limits of this present study, they were indicators that far from conforming to stereotypes, individual labourers of the 1840s and 1850s were developing a clearer sense of social relationships and their own individual and collective sense of class-consciousness. The roots of this discernment probably grew out of a mixture of Chartism, Methodism and local trade unionism, although further research is needed to determine exactly when and to what extent class-consciousness developed in rural Worcestershire during this later period. The main aim of this study was to look at the impact of key social and economic changes taking place between 1790 and 1841 in order to determine what impact they had on the lives of agricultural labourers in Worcestershire. It also sought to move away from received concepts of ideal rural communities and to explore the reality of life in three specific parishes: Elmley Lovett, Inkberrow and Powick. Although Tonnies believed in a 'higher form' of rural community based on neighbourhood clones living in total co-operation, this study has taken a different view.³⁵ In so doing, it was clear that this was a difficult task and that it was unlikely to fulfil Mick Reed's requirement that new studies should aim to tie

³³ WCRO: BA/5518/2, Jesse Shervington, *Poetical Odds and Ends* (Worcester: 1907). See 'The Old Shepherd'.

³⁴ W.E. Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom* (1903) (New York: August M. Kelley, 1968). See Chapters 11, V, VI and XI.

³⁵ Tonnies, *Community and Association*: 49.

up all the loose ends in order to produce a definitive study of rural history.³⁶ At the very least, however, it has provided a comparison with existing studies of rural life in southern England during the same period and it is hoped that further studies will follow.

³⁶ Reed, 'Class and Conflict in Rural England', 3.

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