

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis seeks to build on the author's previous study of *Class, Community and Social Relationships in Two Worcestershire Villages (1815-1841)*<sup>1</sup> by taking a more holistic approach to exploring the lives of agricultural labourers in Worcestershire between 1790 and 1841. Selecting a period for study is inevitably contentious, but the period encompassed a number of significant events that had a major impact on English social, economic and political life. It begins the year after the 1789 Revolution in France and ends three years after the accession of Queen Victoria in 1838. During this period, the lives of both urban and rural labourers changed significantly, although historians have generally placed more emphasis on changes affecting urban labourers rather than their rural counterparts.

Nevertheless, so far as rural labourers were concerned, the period 1790-1841 was one of unprecedented change. It included the enclosure of common land, open fields and wastes and changes in agricultural production, stimulated partly by the needs of a growing population and by rising prices during the Napoleonic Wars of 1793-1815. Agricultural labourers also experienced periodic years of crisis, particularly between 1794-1796, 1800-1801 and 1815-1820, when high prices and underemployment or unemployment made many dependent on poor relief or forced others into crime or social disaffection. For many historians, this period was one where declining circumstances and changes in poor relief inevitably led the uprising of 1830, popularly known as 'The Last Labourers' Revolt'. This study seeks to establish whether this 'pattern' of events was apparent in Worcestershire during the same period and to determine whether national and local reactions in the ten years after 1830 made any significant change to rural labourers' social, economic or political circumstances. The decision to end the study in 1841 was due to the fact that new forces like Chartism, trades unionism and the full implementation of the 1834 Poor Law were beginning to impact on Worcestershire labourers' lives and moving them in a different direction.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Maynard, 'Class, Community and Social Relationships in Two Worcestershire Villages, 1815-1841', (MPhil thesis, Open University, 1988).

Looking at past and present approaches to nineteenth-century rural history, however, it was not difficult to discover different writers' empathies towards rural labourers' lives during this period. Such empathy was sometimes born of natural sympathy for the agricultural labourers' lot and sometimes conditioned by contemporary perceptions of the countryside and deeply held political beliefs of both right- and left-wing historians and commentators. For some on the right, the agricultural labourer of the late eighteenth century was either romanticised as a robust hard-working peasant, or seen as a surly churl, a potentially dangerous 'Hodge' to be kept in his place and protected from being politicised by revolutionary urban radicals. For some on the left, the agricultural labourer was once a self-sufficient member of a co-operative village community whose independence and mutuality was destroyed by greedy capitalist landowners and profit seeking farmers. Those forced to remain on the land became a downtrodden workforce with a history of periodic 'martyrdom' and sporadic attempts at militant action. Since many rural historical studies over the last century promoted these views, any new study had to begin with some caution and discernment. The purpose of this research was not to denigrate the views of other historians or to deny the decline in agricultural labourers' economic circumstances between 1790 and 1841. Instead, it set out to determine to what extent issues highlighted in other studies were also applicable to Worcestershire or, if not, what specific economic and social changes had the most impact on the county's rural labourers. This study also takes on the task of looking for evidence that reflects the labourer's day-to-day life more clearly than those perceptions of pastors, masters and political sympathisers. In this respect, initial exploration was not very hopeful since agricultural labourers were the least likely to have left written evidence behind them and concepts of oral history were undeveloped until the second half of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, it is now more than a hundred years since Richard Jefferies wondered what English history would be like if all records were swept away and historians had to reconstruct the past from popular tradition and national monuments.<sup>2</sup> He supposed that this process might tell another story, save for the

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Jefferies (1848-1887) was famous for his novels and writings on rural life. What is less

fact that human memories of the past faded away so very quickly. Writing in the late nineteenth century he lamented that nothing had been done to record oral history from agricultural labourers with direct experience of ‘the times of Riot and the Enclosures of the Common lands’ during the first decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> When Jefferies tried to undertake this task, however, he was disappointed with his own oral enquiries since he found labourers’ memories of the past both tenuous and inaccurate.<sup>4</sup> Part of the reason for his disappointment, probably came from the fact that Jefferies, like other rural commentators, romanticised his informants, comparing them to Roman generals like Vespasian and praising their natural stoicism in the face of human adversity. His approach suggested that what labourers said about their own experience was more down-to-earth, mundane and inglorious perhaps than Jefferies wanted to hear. Writing in 1912 George Sturt<sup>5</sup> admitted that his interest in rural history was also partly conditioned by, ‘a sort of afterglow from the old civilisation’.<sup>6</sup> For Sturt the key factors which led to the social ‘humiliation’ of labouring people<sup>7</sup> during the course of the nineteenth century were the gradual disappearance from rural life of customary economic and social behaviour, the impact of enclosure on wages and employment and the loss of common rights and arrival of mass manufacturing and farm machinery.<sup>8</sup> Sturt, however, saw enclosure as the prime cause of the labourers’ decline since it was enclosure to which ‘may be traced all the changes that have subsequently passed over the village. It was like knocking the keystone out of an arch’.<sup>9</sup>

The Hammonds, whose seminal work *The Village Labourer* appeared the same year, reinforced Sturt’s views.<sup>10</sup> Firmly based on early twentieth century concepts of socialism and class-consciousness, the Hammonds analysed

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well known is the fact that he was the son of a Wiltshire farmer and came from a long line of farming folk. He had an intimate knowledge of agricultural labourers and his first publications in 1872 were two letters to *The Times* on the condition of the Wiltshire labourers.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Jefferies, ‘Three Centuries at Home’, in *The Old House at Coate* (1948) (Bradford on Avon: Ex Libris Press, 1985): 122-123.

<sup>4</sup> Jefferies, ‘Three Centuries at Home’, 124-127.

<sup>5</sup> Sturt ran a family wheelwright’s shop at Farnham, Hampshire between 1884 and 1920 before becoming known as a writer. He is regarded as an acute, sympathetic, but wholly unsentimental observer of village life.

<sup>6</sup> George Sturt, *Change in the Village* (1912). (Bradford on Avon: Caliban, 1984): 83.

<sup>7</sup> Sturt, *Change in the Village*: 100.

<sup>8</sup> Sturt, *Change in the Village*: 77-99.

<sup>9</sup> Sturt, *Change in the Village*: 86.

<sup>10</sup> J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer 1760-1832*. (London: 1912).

Parliamentary Papers on enclosure to tell a story which, at its simplest, saw the humblest and poorest agricultural labourers robbed of their common rights by profiteering farmers and the aristocratic 'governing class' until the point where 'great numbers of contented men' were driven 'into permanent poverty and despair'.<sup>11</sup> In their view, there were few rural labourers in 'the old village' without land or common rights and most had the opportunity to rise up the social ladder through saving their wages as farm servants, starting married life in a rented cottage with common rights and then saving up to buy their own land.<sup>12</sup> Since the Hammonds, approaches to rural history have become more complex and oblique although sometimes equally partisan. They have shifted away from what Reed and Wells referred to - somewhat unfairly - as a concern with 'counting cows and ploughs', although many remained predominantly economic studies.<sup>13</sup> What was needed, they suggested, were more holistic studies of agricultural areas outside the southern counties, which synthesised the wealth of evidence available in order to tell people more about the daily lives and motivations of rural people.

Some historians had already undertaken this challenge successfully. K.D. M. Snell's *Annals of the Labouring Poor* (1985)<sup>14</sup> provided a long-term study of social change and the quality of agricultural life in the south of England between 1660 and 1900, although admittedly it remained dependent on quantitative data rather than qualitative evidence based on human experience. The problem with determining human experience, of course, is reliant on the type of evidence available and the individual historian's ability to discern what human values and experience might be implicit in such evidence. Also, as John Rule (1992) pointed out,<sup>15</sup> there was another perceptual problem with the way historians have looked at evidence surviving from this period because of a received concept of what he referred to as the 'so-called Agricultural Revolution'. Rule suggested that the concept of an 'Agricultural Revolution' still governs perceptions today, although in reality the

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<sup>11</sup> Hammond, *The Village Labourer*: 48-49.

<sup>12</sup> Hammond, *The Village Labourer*: 33.

<sup>13</sup> M. Reed, 'Class, Conflict and Protest in Rural England: Some Reflections on a Debate', in M. Reed and R. Wells (eds.), *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700 - 1880* (Chippenham: Frank Cass, 1990): 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> K.D.M Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor, Social change in Agrarian England 1660-1900* (1985) (Bath: Bath Press 1997): 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> J. Rule, *The Vital Century: England's Developing Economy 1714-1815* (London: Longman, 1992): 54.

terminology was used largely by those contemporaries most committed to promoting new farming methods. Rule believed that such terminology also coloured the contemporary view of agricultural history with propaganda, if not polemic. He pointed out that during the 'Agricultural Revolution' enthusiasts for enclosure and new farming methods abounded, thus creating a wealth of documentary evidence which then biased modern studies towards recording economic change rather than concentrating on its social impact. Rule argued persuasively that because some economic historians were predominantly interested in statistics they gave little regard to the domestic situation of agricultural labourers. They did, however, usually agree with received opinion that during the 'Revolution' an oppressed rural proletariat was driven from the land in droves and forced to live out the rest of their wretched lives in England's burgeoning industrial cities.

Ian Dyck (1992)<sup>16</sup>, however, suggested that agricultural history remained relatively unexplored territory because the Industrial Revolution and the lives of urban labourers were thought to be more important. He pointed out that farm-workers remained numerically the single largest group of workers in Regency England and their stories, although much-neglected, deserved to be told. Dyck believed the problem of insufficient evidence could be resolved if historians shifted away from the old labour history conventions of divorcing politics from culture, of emphasising town over country and assuming that the ideal radical must almost volunteer for dispossession before achieving any notice from academic researchers.<sup>17</sup> Evidence was available provided historians looked for it and dealt with it in its own context rather than relating it to received impressions from previous urban studies.

That said, there has been a growth in studies of popular protest and social unrest in the last forty years which has included significant analyses of popular protest, political protest and social unrest in both urban and rural areas. John E. Archer (2000) has provided a comprehensive summary of historiography relating to

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<sup>16</sup> Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Dyck, *William Cobbett*: 2-3.

these topics covering the period 1780-1840 and these have informed this study.<sup>18</sup> Adrian Randall and Alan Charlesworth have subsequently brought together a number of essays that explore the relationship between popular protest, the moral economy of the crowd and labourers' moral values.<sup>19</sup> In this collection, Roger Wells, in particular, argues that in the south and south-east of England during this period, the pattern of popular protest that enabled crowds to take direct action to defend their traditional rights to ensure fairness in the market-place changed irrevocably.<sup>20</sup> Wells argued that at a village level, fair-price notions were increasingly challenged by market forces and that rising unemployment and underemployment jeopardised the customary view that the poor had a right to poor relief and especially adequate public assistance.<sup>21</sup> This thesis takes due cognisance of both these recent studies and considers the role that popular protest played in Worcestershire during this period.

No study of agricultural labourers' lives in Worcestershire would be complete, however, without some consideration of the causes and incidence of rural crime. Whilst this thesis cannot take up all the issues covered by David Jones (1982) in his detailed overview of crime in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, it does set out to determine whether crime rose markedly in Worcestershire between 1815 and 1817.<sup>22</sup> It also seeks to determine whether offences against the Game Laws in Worcestershire were numerically more significant than other rural crimes and to explore what distinctions need to be made between those individuals who committed offences against the Game Laws as a result of demoralisation and distress and those poaching gangs who stole for profit.<sup>23</sup> This study also recognised that there was a close correlation during this period between declining living standards, popular protest and crime and has paid particular attention to the view

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<sup>18</sup> John E. Archer, *Social Unrest and Popular Protest in England 1780-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Archer also focuses on policing and law enforcement and considers historians' views on how close England came to revolution during this period.

<sup>19</sup> Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth (eds.) *Moral Economy and Popular Protest* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Roger Wells, 'The moral economy of the English countryside', Randall and Charlesworth (eds.) *Moral Economy and Popular Protest*: 250. Wells argues that a key element of the 'moral economy' of rural areas was the idea that local consumers had a priority for locally-grown foodstuffs.

<sup>21</sup> Wells, 'The moral economy of the English countryside': 252.

<sup>22</sup> David Jones, *Crime, Protest, Community and Police in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982): 4. Jones cites research indicating a 'spectacular rise in crime' between 1815 and 1817.

<sup>23</sup> Jones, *Crime, Protest, Community and Police*: 67.

that some crimes, particularly poaching, should be regarded as ‘social crimes’. The author has also noted Frank McLynn’s view that most forms of rioting should be considered as social crimes.<sup>24</sup>

Whether agricultural labourers, or those Dyck referred to as ‘farm-workers’, could be seen as a unified group and universally subjected to declining living standards was questionable, however, since distinctions had to be made initially between those who worked as farm servants and those who were employed as day labourers. There were those farm-workers whose skills as carters and shepherds earned them higher wages than those of general labourers. Different job categories therefore meant variable incomes and implied the possibility of different life experiences, ranging from extreme poverty to the possibility that some skilled rural workers might have aspirations more in keeping with those of small farmers rather than fellow labourers. Unfortunately, the fact that agricultural workers left few autobiographies behind them seemed a major documentary disadvantage. John Burnett collected together some that survive, but these constituted a mere handful and offered only a limited insight into rural labourers’ lives<sup>25</sup>. Despite the problems involved in finding sufficient evidence, this study attempted to redress this imbalance and tried to interpret available documentation from the labourers’ point-of-view wherever possible.

It was, however, felt particularly important that any study of Worcestershire should be rooted firmly in primary sources relating to specific rural communities rather than giving undue consideration to contemporary urban views of agricultural life. As Malcolm Chase indicated in *The People’s Farm* (1988),<sup>26</sup> agriculture was one of the recurring themes in urban English radical politics from the late eighteenth century up to Chartism in the mid nineteenth, mostly because it was an emblem for proposed radical redistributions of landed property. Some Labour historians, therefore, may have had their views of the countryside coloured by the agrarian views of urban radicals rather than exploring evidence available in local record offices that might have had more to say about the rural labourers’ real

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<sup>24</sup> Frank McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> John Burnett, *Useful Toil* (London: Allen Lane, 1982).

<sup>26</sup> Malcolm Chase, *The People’s Farm* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988): 2.

experiences. Chase believed that contemporary urban views and the rallying cry, 'The Land is the people's farm', were not actually about agriculture at all, nor did they represent the opinions of rural labourers. They were, instead, representative of industrial working-class responses to the economic, social and political dislocation created by the Industrial Revolution, which looked for a solution to current ills in a return to the land. Such a return, Chase maintained, was seen rather romantically as the embodiment of the profound relationship felt to exist between man and the soil and signifying a time when people were thought to be in control of the means of production and not vice-versa.<sup>27</sup> Amongst other radical ideas put forward at this time was the somewhat utopian demand for a return to old Saxon Laws, the abolition of the nobility and the clergy and every individual to be given four to five acres of land as part of a national Jubilee.<sup>28</sup> Thomas Paine had addressed these same issues in his 1795 pamphlet *Agrarian Justice*, although coming to a different conclusion. Rather than having all the upheaval of a re-distribution of land, Paine proposed the creation of a public fund to repay individuals for the loss of their natural land rights.<sup>29</sup>

This urban view of a lost Eden destroyed by contemporary capitalism was an extremely powerful one, particularly as it found two leading apologists in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. For Engels the pre-industrial village community was one where young people grew up in 'idyllic simplicity' in a rural society based on mutually interdependent ranks and orders. In such village communities, the farmer-weavers looked up to the squire as their 'natural superior' asking him for advice when necessary, taking their disputes before him for arbitration and 'gave him all honour as this patriarchal relationship required'.<sup>30</sup> Engels suggested that the Industrial Revolution changed all this forever. For Marx, the explanation was fundamentally economic: the rise of capital farms and merchant farms encouraged the enclosure of common land. He saw English Parliamentary Enclosure Acts as no more than a legalised form of robbery which transformed peasant farmers from independent cultivators of their own land into tenants at will and freed up

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<sup>27</sup> Chase, *The People's Farm*: 2-4.

<sup>28</sup> Chase, *The People's Farm*: 73.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice* (1795). Reprinted in M.Foot & I. Kramnick (eds.) *The Thomas Paine Reader* (St. Ives: Harmondsworth, 1987): 471.

<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845) (London: Panther, 1969): 38.



agricultural labourers to become proletarians ready to be gobbled up by manufacturing industry. Those labourers who were left behind in the countryside could only survive as, ‘beggars, robbers, vagabonds’.<sup>31</sup>

Whilst recognising the value of the political ideologies developed by Marx and Engels, this study also accepted the fact that eighteenth and nineteenth century urban radicals had markedly different views of the English countryside than landowners, farmers and agricultural labourers. This study has therefore made extensive use of primary sources as a means of focusing on how issues were perceived and dealt with in specific rural towns and villages. The value of this approach lay in the fact that whilst most archive material has been well catalogued it has often been stored in separate collections without being cross-referenced. By bringing seemingly disparate documentation together, it was possible to see labourers’ lives within the context of their individual parishes and village communities.

Before any study of rural life in Worcestershire could begin, there were other issues to be resolved. One of the most important was the need to provide an empirical and theoretical definition of what constituted a ‘community’ in the sense that people were not only living in a specific locality, but they also shared common lifestyles, interests and values.<sup>32</sup> This task was not easy, since many historians, past and present have assumed that agricultural labourers automatically experienced community in their daily lives regardless of factors such as geographical location or job categories. E.P. Thompson suggested that community was mostly concerned with ‘the cultural life of the poor’ and that sharing customs, traditions, working practices, diet and daily lives were common experiences. Thompson’s seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), however, focused more on urban labourers’ rituals of mutuality rather than on rural agricultural labourers.<sup>33</sup> His general view was that rural communal lifestyles were dislocated in the nineteenth century by the growing exodus from the countryside to the cities and

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<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1. (1867) (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1954): 678-686.

<sup>32</sup> Reed and Wells, ‘An Agenda for Modern Rural History’, in M. Reed and R. Wells (eds.) *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700 – 1880*: 214.

<sup>33</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) (Aylesbury: Harmondsworth, 1968): 440 and 460.

were less important than the development of class consciousness and an 'independent working class culture' in urban towns and cities.<sup>34</sup>

Raymond Williams in his study of past historical concepts of the country and the city believed that the situation was more complex because in reality every single existing community differed significantly from another.<sup>35</sup> He also pointed out that all communities contained their own economic and social inequalities, suggesting that mutuality amongst urban labourers was never all embracing. Taking the hypothesis that community could be defined as 'an active democracy in which all classes come together in mutual support for a common cause',<sup>36</sup> Williams asked himself the following question about the past: 'to what extent was there ever a genuine community?' His conclusion, not unsurprisingly, was that his initial definition of a democratic community was untenable because every urban or rural community would have varied enormously depending on both geographical situation and local politics. He also acknowledged that any definition also had to take into account 'the mutuality of the oppressed' since in every town and village there were always those who lived on the margins of society and were engaged in their own process of communal struggle.<sup>37</sup>

Turning to more recent commentators, the word 'community' appeared to become even more oblique. Jeffery Weeks in his watershed study of gay rights argued that what was important about a sense of community was not what was shared in common, in this case sexuality, but self-definition and, yet again, mutuality – you were a community if you thought you were and acted collectively as a consequence.<sup>38</sup> The problem with self-definition, however, was that this could only be shared by those who perceived themselves as being part of the group and not necessarily by those outside the group or those who refused to accept a group's own self-definition. In other words, in Weeks' view, self-definition could be deceptive. In a think-tank publication for Demos in 1994, Dick Atkinson's proposal for re-energising urban communities argued similarly, that disparate

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<sup>34</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*: 460-462.

<sup>35</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973) (St. Albans: Paladin, 1975).

<sup>36</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*: 131.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*: 130-131.

<sup>38</sup> Jeffery Weeks, *Coming Out* (1977) (London: Quartet Books, 1990): 23.

groups of people in self-governing institutions could be persuaded to see themselves as part of a larger whole if they acted for the general good and developed a common agenda for change. By accepting differences and collaborating with each other, each organisation would come together to form an overall coherent community which could re-establish bonds of communal support and self-governing behaviour in order to reverse the modern trend of selfish individualism that led to vandalism, violence and continuous urban decay.<sup>39</sup>

These interpretations of community were also partisan, as one might have expected, and they remain so. They also formed part of a conceptual trail that led back inevitably to Ferdinand Tonnies' major work *Community and Society* (1887) that concerned itself with trying to analyse the fundamental differences between urban and rural society. For Tonnies, rural society was superior to urban living, because agricultural communities were more 'organic' and rooted in common experience. He defined community as 'a rural society resting on bonds of kinship, place and mind plus a discernible consensus of wills ennobled by folklore and religion'. People living in such communities, therefore, led the same lives, spoke the same language and shared common customs and beliefs. Their houses were usually in close proximity to each other and, as peasants, they lived self-sufficient lives where resources were usually supplemented 'through the co-operation of neighbours and assistance from communal helpers, as, for instance, the village blacksmith and other artisans'.<sup>40</sup> For Tonnies, village life at its best consisted of a natural and 'higher form' of existence to that of urban towns and cities and was, 'the lasting and genuine form of living together.' Urban life was 'transitory and superficial', a 'mechanical aggregate and artefact'.<sup>41</sup> Tonnies' language, particularly the use of 'higher form of existence' compared to 'mechanical aggregate', again embodied a romantic interpretation of a rural past destroyed by mechanisation. Indeed, Tonnies' work was almost *fin-de-siècle* in its concern to prove the existence of pre-urban 'organic' communities where life was more idyllic than the harsh realities of a late-Victorian industrialised Europe

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<sup>39</sup> D. Atkinson, *The Common Sense of Community* (London: Demos, 1994): 1-4.

<sup>40</sup> Ferdinand Tonnies, *Community and Society* (1887) (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1997): 49-55.

<sup>41</sup> Tonnies, *Community and Society*: 35.

Similarly, Richard Jefferies' descriptions of English countryside at the end of the nineteenth century were just as romantic. In 'The Squire and the Land', Jefferies put what he thought was the landowner's traditional paternalistic point of view of community when he had his squire of the 1880s say:

The social relations are not nearly so sharply defined in our village as in cities and their suburbs. We all have more or less a community of interest and a common subject to talk about: the weather, the crops and the state of farming.<sup>42</sup>

What Jefferies said through the persona of the squire sounded plausible enough, but it only took a modicum of common sense to see that the state of farming referred to would be perceived differently: the squire thinking about his rents, the farmer thinking about his profits and the agricultural labourer knowing his job, income and tied cottage depended on the well-being and good opinion of the other two. Whilst some representatives of each group might share a common concern and altruism, the thoughts and actions of the majority were likely to be spring from self-interest and self-preservation tempered, perhaps, by individual moral values and personal beliefs.

The task of defining community, therefore, was highly problematic and potentially self-defeating. Twenty-seven years ago Alan Mcfarlane (1977) pointed out that as many as 94 definitions of community could co-exist in one volume devoted to the subject. He suggested that what constituted a community could only be resolved by selecting a unit of people for observation at any given time or analysing a unit for its internal structures provided that unit has a recognisable system of some kind.<sup>43</sup> Whilst this was useful for some quantifiable purposes, it did not necessarily provide an opportunity to look in more detail at how communities of agricultural labourers functioned and operated on a daily basis. More recently, however, Peter Burke (1992) has suggested that a community should not be studied as a statistical construct but as a group of people living in the

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<sup>42</sup> Jefferies, 'The Squire and the Land' in *The Old House at Coate*: 146.

<sup>43</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *Reconstructing Historical Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977): 2-4.

same place, sharing at times a sense of collective identity, but not necessarily having homogeneous attitudes or being free from conflict and discord.<sup>44</sup> Burke's view was felt sound enough to form the empirical basis of this study. That said, the study also kept in mind the fact that people living in close proximity with one another may have come to do so by chance and that some individuals may have identified themselves more strongly with a place they had lived in previously or where they might wish to live in the future.

In looking at any given rural community, it was also important to remember that during the eighteenth century England was a hierarchical society of ranks and orders and that at the top, local squires and parsons were usually trying to impose *their* ideas of community from above. The clergy, in particular, had ample opportunity to do so for as well as conveying moral attitudes in sermons, they also made announcements about the state of the nation and important events to those who attended church. Church bells were tolled to announce royal deaths or pealed out in celebration of military victories. The church door was also the parish's official notice board and bells and bonfires celebrated events in the protestant calendar. The local squire, for his part, determined local political dynamics and, when in residence, often staged key celebrations covering his family's rites of passage, usually distributing largesse at the birth of an heir or a son's coming of age. Squire and parson also distributed gifts of food and money to the needy and provided employment opportunities for those whom they deemed as respectable. Yet, as David Eastwood has pointed out, although theirs was the official culture of village communities, a popular culture existed which although sometimes veiled and sometimes aggressive probably had more impact on local villagers than squire and parson could ever have imagined.<sup>45</sup>

Elements of popular culture, therefore, had much to contribute towards an understanding of the rural labourer and this study took due cognisance of E.P. Thompson's proposition that historians should study the cultural life of the community through its communal year, its customs and traditions. Equally relevant

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (1992) (Padstow: Polity Press, 1996): 57-58.

<sup>45</sup> David Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces 1700-1870* (New York: Macmillan, 1997): 26-36.

was Thompson's view that many communities in the late eighteenth century could be 'clannish within and a closed community to outsiders'.<sup>46</sup> In determining how an insider saw village life differently, John Clare's autobiographical writings proved particularly useful since his picture of Helpstone in the 1800s provided a vivid picture of the common experiences of his contemporary community.<sup>47</sup> More importantly, Clare was a realist who accepted that his village community was far from idyllic and contained much savagery, cruelty and brutishness. Could the village annals be written, he argued, 'they would make no idyll; they would be too much stained by tragedy, and vice and misery'.<sup>48</sup> Clare also had a strong sense of place in which common land, roads, tracks, woods, fields and even individual trees had significant meaning.<sup>49</sup> As an insider, Clare described elements of village life that academic historians have failed to explore, probably because they appeared too ordinary:

Bred in a village full of strife and noise,  
Old senseless gossips and blackguarding boys,  
Ploughmen and threshers, whose discourses led  
To nothing more than labour's rude employs,  
'Bout work being slack, and rise and fall of bred,  
And who was like to die, and who were like to wed.<sup>50</sup>

It could be argued, of course, that Clare was neither a typical villager nor did he live out his entire life in his community as a full-time agricultural labourer. Nevertheless, his descriptions of daily life in Helpstone were used as a marker when looking at specific features of life in the Worcestershire villages selected for this study. That selection process, however, led to a further distinction having to be made between the words 'community' and 'village' since both ran the risk of being interchangeable and some clarity was needed about their usage.

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<sup>46</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*: 447-448.

<sup>47</sup> E. Robinson (ed.), John Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*, (1983) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986): 1-12.

<sup>48</sup> Clare, *Autobiographical Writing*: 7.

<sup>49</sup> Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*: 28-29.

<sup>50</sup> John Clare, 'The Village Minstrel.' The poem was written at Helpstone between 1818-1821. Published in J. Tibble and A. Tibble (eds), John Clare, *Selected Poems* (Guernsey: J M Dent, 1984): 34.

Richard Muir (1981) pointed out that just as there were problems in our understanding of the word ‘community’ there were similar problems making a clear distinction between a ‘community’ and a ‘village.’ This was because the word ‘village’ now evokes in the public imagination ‘the image of rustic contentment’ and a perception of ‘timeless inertia.’ Muir believed that this image was so beguiling that it had seduced academics as well as modern image-makers and the end results were ‘finely wrought’ village histories that were often highly speculative about village origins and development.<sup>51</sup> In Worcestershire, such local histories were mostly written by clergymen, examples being the Reverend W.H. Shawcross’s *Bretforton Memories* and the Reverend E.W. Bartlam’s *Notes on the Parishes of Elmley Lovett and Hampton Lovett*.<sup>52</sup> That said, it should not be assumed that all villages had a resident parson or even a local squire because, as George Sturt pointed out, some villages like Bourne in Hampshire, had neither. Despite its appearance, Bourne was never an ancient settlement, not did it ever have the stereotypical trappings of a squire or village green. Bourne, in fact, was uninhabited until the middle of the eighteenth century until a few squatters from neighbouring villages settled on the waste. It then developed into an ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ village until, with the arrival of affluent commuters in the late nineteenth century it became moulded architecturally into a more typical example of what a village was thought to look like.<sup>53</sup> Yet even in Bourne, Sturt could still identify labourers who shared customs and modes of thought similar to those discernible in Clare’s Helpstone. Labourers in Bourne also shared a common dialect and similar beliefs and behaviour, even if Sturt as a non-labourer stereotyped these rather disparagingly as ‘primitive codes’ and ‘rustic tradition’.<sup>54</sup>

For Muir, the village was also not a farmstead and not a hamlet (a small group of farmsteads clustered together). He did not attempt, however, to define exactly what a village was, other than by saying that, subjectively, a village had a

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<sup>51</sup> R. Muir, *Shell Guide to Reading the Landscape* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981): 153.

<sup>52</sup> W. H. Shawcross, *Bretforton Memories* (Evesham: 1890).

WCRO: BA/3685, Rev. E.W. Bartram, *Notes on the Parishes of Elmley Lovett and Hampton Lovett*, Typescript (1958).

<sup>53</sup> Sturt, *Change in the Village*: 1-3.

<sup>54</sup> Sturt, *Change in the Village*: 4-5.

‘village feeling’.<sup>55</sup> The reason he chose not to provide a fuller definition was because each village had its own story and many village forms were quite individual.<sup>56</sup> Muir did, however, make a distinction between the ‘open’ village, a spontaneous creation by members of the local community and the ‘close’ village under the ownership and regulation of the lord of the manor.<sup>57</sup> This concept of open and closed villages, familiar to most historians, was borne in mind during the present study, since the nature of a ‘close’ village meant that some aspects of labourers’ lives might be less evident because of the control exerted over them by the Lord of the Manor. That said, care was taken not to assume a model of ‘open’ and ‘close’ villages as outlined by Dennis Mills (1980).<sup>58</sup> Whilst it is possible to ‘prove’ that ‘open villages’ had distinct features in terms of size, squatter populations and higher poor rates, this study chose not to see this as a ‘model’ of inferiority or to assume that ‘open’ parishes were necessarily either problematic or hotbeds of radicalism.<sup>59</sup> Instead, due cognisance was taken of Sarah Banks’ recent argument that although the terms ‘open’ and ‘close’ villages are much used, there is actually no consensus on what the terms actually mean. Banks argues against using these words as a model that predetermines or influences certain social and economic features of village life and suggests instead that historians use them only to gain insights into the contrasting size, ownership and occupational patterns of different parishes.<sup>60</sup> Because Worcestershire in the 1790s also contained developing industrial areas, it also had to be remembered that villages differed according to geographical location, proximity to manufacturing towns and the extent to which they had become centres for rural industries. Some villages around Worcester, for example, had concentrations of rural outworkers who supplied hand-made gloves for local manufacturers and wholesalers. Nail making took place in several villages around Bromsgrove and domestic needle makers were to be found in Feckenham, close to the larger needle-manufacturing town of Redditch.

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<sup>55</sup> Muir, *Shell Guide*: 154-155.

<sup>56</sup> Muir, *Shell Guide*: 158.

<sup>57</sup> Muir, *Shell Guide*: 168.

<sup>58</sup> Dennis R. Mills, *Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1980).

<sup>59</sup> Mills, *Lord and Peasant*: 52.

<sup>60</sup> S.J. Banks, ‘Nineteenth-century scandal or twentieth-century model? A new look at ‘open’ and ‘close’ parishes’, *Economic History Review* (1988): 71.



Finally, an important distinction had to be made between the village, the community and the parish. W.E. Tate pointed out that although, ecclesiastically, the parish was ‘a circuit of ground which is committed to the charge of one person or vicar, or to another minister having the care of souls within,’ the parish was not a township, since a parish might contain several towns or villages. In Tate’s view the parish was best defined as, ‘the territorial basis of community service’ centred on vestries as decision-making forums where the inhabitants agreed local regulation of common land and appointed parish officers.<sup>61</sup> In reality, however, it had to be remembered that parish vestry meetings in the early nineteenth century were far from democratic and all too often those who met were the principal inhabitants of the parish who could be described as an oligarchy bent on governing the parish in very specific ways.<sup>62</sup>

The importance of the parish vestry in terms of this study could not be underestimated. E. W. Martin has pointed out that the vestry was, in effect, the fundamental power base that controlled the lives of villagers for good or ill. It could impose taxation, levy highway rates, make byelaws, had control of the village pound and the commons and wastes. Above all, it was the vestry that was responsible for appointing the overseers to the poor and, prior to 1834, the overseers had much more than the simple relief of the poor to engage them. Not only did they have to pay out allowances to those in want, they had to find work for the unemployed, house the homeless, assist the sick and the elderly and bind children out as apprentices. They had to do all this whilst trying to distinguish the parish poor from travellers and vagrants or those who had no legal right of settlement within the parish.<sup>63</sup> The role of the vestry during this period, therefore, was as much secular as it was ecclesiastical and how parish officers approached their roles, and under whose direction, was essential to understanding some crucial aspects of Worcestershire labourers’ lives in relation to social and economic change.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest* (1945) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969): 10.

<sup>62</sup> Tate, *The Parish Chest*: 18.

<sup>63</sup> Tate, *The Parish Chest*: 41.

<sup>64</sup> E.W. Martin, *The Secret People* (London: Phoenix House, 1954): 41.

Worcestershire, however, was a large county, whose boundaries changed periodically and it was impossible to make a study of all its many parishes. A decision was taken to choose three parishes against specific criteria in order to have a social microscope through which to explore the impact at a local level of the wider changes happening across the county and elsewhere. The first was that the parishes should have sufficient archive material relating to themes chosen for this study and the second was that they should be located in different geographical parts of the county. A third criterion was that the main villages within each parish should be different in terms of population size and whether parishes and villages were 'open' or 'closed'. Lastly, one of the parishes was chosen because it recorded the only incident of arson during the Last Labourers' Revolt that ended in public execution and this incident was thought worth exploring in some detail since the parish involved was small and prosperous and unlikely to be a hotbed of rural discontent.

It was felt that although the amount of evidence might be variable, the parishes should also be capable of comparison, particularly in relation to key chapters on enclosure and poor relief. It was of fundamental importance, therefore, that all three parishes had unenclosed common land at the start of the period under examination. In taking these decisions, it was accepted that these parishes might not be typical of other parishes in Worcestershire, but that this study might prove a benchmark for others to follow. The parishes chosen were Powick, Inberrow and Elmley Lovett:

**Map of Worcestershire 1810 showing the location of Powick,  
Inkberrow and Elmley Lovett**

Powick, was chosen because of its closeness to the county town of Worcester, centre for glove making and porcelain manufacture. Inkberrow was close to the needle-making centre of Redditch, and Elmley Lovett lay mid-way between the salt-industry town of Droitwich and the rapidly developing carpet industry town of Kidderminster. These industrial towns were also service centres for agriculture and therefore possible magnets for migration if enclosure and changes in land use led to significant rural depopulation. The villages of Powick, Inkberrow and Elmley Lovett were also chosen because of their geographical situation. Powick stood on a main route into the county from Herefordshire while Inkberrow lay close to the Warwickshire border near Alcester. Elmley Lovett was small and relatively isolated, although geographically close to the towns of Kidderminster and Droitwich. The villages also had different patterns of land-ownership and could be explored in terms of whether they were open or close parishes. The major landowners at Powick were the Earl of Coventry, a county magnate, whose main seat was at Croome Court, and Earl Beauchamp who had estates in several areas but was resident locally at Madresfield Court. At Inkberrow the major landowners were Earl Beauchamp, the Marquess of Hertford and the Earl of Abergavenny. None of these landowners were resident there, nor was there any evidence of their visiting their landholdings. This left the vicar, the Reverend William Heath, as the key 'parish gentry' influence on Inkberrow parish and village affairs between 1792 and 1830. Elmley Lovett, however, had one major resident landowner, George Forester and his principal estate surrounded the main village and the nearby villages of Cutnall Green and Sneads Green. This made him potentially a powerful controlling influence on the lives of labourers in all three settlements.

Importantly, the villages were also chosen because of their potential for social unrest and protest and because all three areas had significant amounts of common land, commons and wastes. Powick residents were involved in a major battle over common rights, which continued sporadically between 1792 and 1834, whilst Inkberrow, a parish notorious for its poverty, experienced a major enclosure in 1814 that affected particular communities of squatters at the Ridgeway and Stock Wood. Elmley Lovett had three areas of common land and also provided the only

instance of rick-burning during the agricultural unrest of 1830 to 1831 usually referred to as ‘The Last Labourers’ Revolt’ or the ‘Swing Riots’. The execution of Thomas Slaughter for arson was one of the key events in Worcestershire in 1831 and his story was not without significance in terms of how his trial was used to make an example of him.

Because there was a danger that the chosen villages were exceptional, other towns and villages in Worcestershire were referred to in order to demonstrate the impact of social and economic change elsewhere in the county. For a wider comparison, reference was also made to similar studies of Herefordshire and Wiltshire.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, studying specific villages provided some detailed evidence of how people reacted to the major changes taking place in English society. Although Peter Burke pointed out that such ‘microhistory’ can be open to the challenge that it trivialises ‘real’ history by simply telling the stories of unimportant people merely for their human interest value, care was taken to ensure that what happened at village level was always related to changes taking place elsewhere in the county and in the country as a whole.<sup>66</sup> The purpose of this study, first and foremost, was to illuminate the lives of Worcestershire’s agricultural labourers in a period of extraordinary social, economic and political change.

In terms of topography Worcestershire was thirty-four miles long, twenty-six miles broad and 220 miles in circumference. It contained 152 parishes, one cathedral city and eleven market towns, and the county’s principal rivers were the Severn, Avon, Teme and Stour. The Severn was particularly important because it was a principal trade route from Bristol as far as Bewdley and from there goods were transported into Wales and West Midlands by pack horses.<sup>67</sup> By the start of the period in question, however, this route was already being partly replaced by canal development. By 1785 the Leominster Canal linked Herefordshire with

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<sup>65</sup> Timothy Shakesheff, ‘Crime, Petty Crime and Social Crime: Rural Herefordshire 1800-1860’ (PhD thesis, Coventry University, 1999) and E Billenge, ‘Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire 1830-1875’ (PhD Thesis, University of Kent, 1984).

<sup>66</sup> Burke, *History and Social Theory*: 41. This approach, however, has already been used successfully by Barry Reay in his study of the Blean area of north Kent. Barry Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800-1839* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>67</sup> WCRO: BA/2388/6, F.R. Andrews Collection: *Anonymous description of Worcestershire* accompanying a map circa 1773.

Tenbury Wells in Worcestershire and the Stourport Canal ran from Lower Mitton inland to link the River Severn to the industrial towns of Kidderminster and Stourbridge.<sup>68</sup> Industrial activity in the county, although limited, was not without some significance. The city of Worcester was a centre for glove making and porcelain manufacture while other towns had their own specialisms: Kidderminster (carpets), Redditch (needles and fish-hooks) and Stourbridge (glass/brick-making/mining). There were also small iron-works along the River Stour between Stourport and Bewdley and nail making at Bromsgrove. At this time the county also embraced the busy industrial town of Dudley (mining/nail making). Given that some of these towns by the 1760s were already centres of urban unrest and collective action, it was important to consider whether radical activity in urban towns influenced reactions to change in the wider countryside.

Despite having a number of manufacturing towns, however, Worcestershire was predominantly an agricultural county. In 1811 the total county population was estimated at 165,000 and of these only 44,600 lived in towns with more than 2000 people (27%).<sup>69</sup> This meant that 73% of the population lived in rural villages, although it should not be supposed that this meant that labourers were particularly isolated from other towns and villages since local carriers usually journeyed once a week to the most important towns.<sup>70</sup> That said, only the principal roads supported by toll gates were in good repair, elsewhere they were bad and uneven and in clayey districts they were said to be scarcely passable on horseback between Christmas and Midsummer because local inhabitants refused to pay for their upkeep.<sup>71</sup>

The topography the agricultural labourer was most familiar with in the 1790s was, therefore, essentially rural and local. Contemporary descriptions gave the impression of a varied landscape, hilly along the western border with Herefordshire and to the south where it bordered the Cotswold Hills. It also had substantial

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<sup>68</sup> *Aris' Birmingham Gazette*: November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1794.

<sup>69</sup> J. Aikin, *England Described* (London: 1818): 186.

<sup>70</sup> R.C. Gaut, *Worcestershire Agriculture* (Worcester: 1939): 118.

<sup>71</sup> W. Pitt, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Worcestershire* (1813) (Plymouth: David and Charles, 1969): 260.

wooded areas at Wyre Forest near Bewdley and Feckenham near Droitwich.<sup>72</sup> To the south and east of the county lay the Worcestershire plain and the Vale of Evesham where farming was still based on the open field system of three crops and fallow. Overall, farming in the county in the 1780s and 1790s was not considered to be very experimental and some common land was said to be overstocked with beasts of poor quality or animals kept tethered to restrict their movement because of lack of grazing space. There were also thought to be between 10,000 and 20,000 acres of waste that might be brought into arable usage rather than being used for pasture.

By 1794 during the French Wars high prices meant that this marginal land became increasingly sought after for cultivation,<sup>73</sup> although that is not to say that the old system of open field farming was unprofitable. The soil on the Worcestershire plain was fertile and the pasturelands good, enabling farmers to produce corn, cattle, sheep, wood, cyder, perry, hops, fruit and meadow saffron.<sup>74</sup> Profitability, however, depended on the size of farm, location and the skill and experience of individual farmers. Unlike southern and eastern counties, however, there were few large farms in the county over 300 acres and most were small, mixed farms between 60 to 100 acres. Farmhouses were generally thought ancient and uncomfortable and many still situated in villages and some distance from the land farmed. Contemporaries thought that the cottages of labourers were worse and had little to recommend them since ‘in the ancient villages and common field parishes they often consist of timber and plaster walls covered with thatch, and are merely a shelter from the weather, without any particular attention having been paid to comfort and convenience’. Whilst some new building was taking place, new property usually commanded higher rents, which led to some being constructed with a communal kitchen and let by the room to a number of tenants.<sup>75</sup>

Rural Worcestershire in the 1790s, therefore, appeared to be relatively prosperous, but slow to adapt to agricultural change or to improve buildings and

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<sup>72</sup> WCRO: BA/2388/6, *Anonymous Description*.

<sup>73</sup> W. Pomeroy, *General View of the Agriculture of Worcestershire* (1794) in W. Marshall, *Review and Abstract of the County reports to the Board of Agriculture*, Vol. 2. (York: 1818) (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968): 358-359.

<sup>74</sup> WCRO: BA/2388/6, *Anonymous Description*.

<sup>75</sup> Pitt, *General View of the Agriculture of Worcestershire*: 19-23.

working practices. It also had significant amounts of open fields, common land and wastes that looked profitable enough to be enclosed. Within this general context and setting, farmers and labourers lived their lives, although what constituted an agricultural labourer was open to question. The danger was to suppose that he was stereotypically a male wage earner forever living in impecunious circumstances without the support of his wife or children and having no means of supplementing his income. As Edward Higgs pointed out, census enumerators in the nineteenth century used the terms 'agricultural labourer' and 'farm servant' in the broadest sense possible and that this terminology was legal jargon rather than a description of an occupation.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the term 'female servant' was often used as a designation for members of a family who might be out of work, it also made no distinction between indoor domestics or outdoor workers. Nor did census enumerators record women's part-time occupations such as glove-making, straw-plaiting or occasional agricultural employment. Such possibilities, had to be kept in mind since any additional family income may have compensated labourers in periods of general wage stagnation and times of seasonal under-employment or unemployment.

In a previous study of the Worcestershire villages of Eastham and Upton Snodsbury,<sup>77</sup> it became clear that there were several designated agricultural labourers in both villages owning or renting significant amounts of land for cultivation who might have had more in common with small farmers than fellow labourers. It was also apparent that there were particular employment patterns evident in both villages. For example, owner-occupiers or tenant farmers with more than a hundred acres employed most farm servants in both villages, but the number of servants employed was minimal if those employers had several sons and daughters of working age. Although some farmers, judging from the age of their servants, appeared to value experience over youth, small farmers of twenty acres or so tended to employ one or two male servants aged between ten and fifteen. In this same study, it was also became clear that labourers were not settled in homogenous groups. Labourers in Eastham lived, for example, in two main cluster groups: at

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<sup>76</sup> Edward Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth Century Censuses,' *History Workshop*, 23. Spring (1987) & 'The Tabulations of Occupations in the Nineteenth Century Censuses with Special Reference to Domestic Servants,' *Local Population Studies*, 28. Spring (1982).

<sup>77</sup> Maynard, 'Class, Community and Social Relationships in Two Worcestershire Villages 1815-1841'.



High Wood Common (enclosed 1814) and around Broadheath Common. Those at High Wood, however, appeared to have been poorer than those living around Broad Heath, as there were several families there in constant receipt of poor relief and others with illegitimate children who had to be apprenticed out at an early age because their mothers were unable to maintain them.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that many labourers had settled around common land suggested that that at some time common land might have been of fundamental importance to them. This was kept in mind when looking at the impact of enclosure on rural communities in Worcestershire chosen for this present study.

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<sup>78</sup> Maynard, 'Class, Community and Social Relationships', Chapter 3