

CHAPTER 6. PATTERNS OF PROTEST AND RURAL POPULAR CULTURE

When Reed and Wells (1990) suggested a new agenda for modern English rural history they called for a more holistic view of rural communities than had been adopted in previous studies.¹ They also highlighted areas for future research in order to ascertain what sources of conflict developed between specific social groups in the period 1700 to 1850 and the localities where such conflicts occurred. Reed and Wells also asked whether the rural proletariat fragmented during this period into ‘roughs’ and ‘respectables’ and, if so, which of these groups was most involved in rural protest.² Their holistic view, however, steered clear of recommending any investigation into rural popular culture and the role it played in labourers’ lives. This was presumably either because they felt it unimportant or because there was a danger of implying that labourers’ thought processes were partly determined by what could be seen as an inferior ‘peasant mentality’ rather than a modern radical outlook. Indeed, most modern historians have generally focused on evidence that rural protest in this period increasingly involved articulate and organised labourers working towards specific political and economic goals. The end result has been a filleting of popular rural culture in order to extract those customs, traditions, ballads, tracts and broadsheets that proved the existence a subversive and politicised underclass rather than any contradictory evidence which suggested that popular culture could also be deeply traditional and conformist.

E.P. Thompson and other historians took the view that eighteenth-century labourers were becoming increasingly radical partly because many contemporary politicians and commentators saw elements of popular culture as both socially and politically dangerous, not only because they encouraged lewd and immoral behaviour amongst labourers, but also because rural and urban customs and traditions did not suit the new working patterns of a money economy.³ For Thompson, the period 1790 to 1840 saw both government and religious denominations, particularly Methodism, actively suppressing aspects of popular culture thought to be obscene and undisciplined in order to pressurise labourers

¹ Reed & Wells, ‘An Agenda for Modern English Rural History’, 215.

² Reed & Wells, ‘An Agenda for Modern English Rural History’, 220-221.

³ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*: 444.

towards personal discipline in both their working lives and their social behaviour.⁴ Other historians took the view that popular culture was more tenacious and far from succumbing to moral pressure, took on a new radical focus in urban areas. This, in turn, raised labourers' political understanding and fermented organised unrest. Martha Vicinis (1974) suggested that the key determining factor influencing working-class consciousness and political behaviour in this period was a street literature consisting of songs, hymns and oral story telling.⁵ Vicinis believed that literacy rates amongst labouring men and women rose rapidly between 1760 and 1840 so that more people were able to take advantage of a wealth of educative street literature at their disposal, particularly when it was written in their own colloquial language.⁶ Whilst accepting that much of this literature also involved romance and sensationalism, she suggested that there was plenty that dealt with local issues and made critical political statements.

Both Thompson and Vicinis focused predominantly on urban communities where it was thought the pressure to create a disciplined well-behaved workforce was strongest. More recently, Dyck has suggested that a similar process took place in the English countryside, largely through the impact of Cobbett's daily newspaper *The Porcupine* and his *Political Register*.⁷ In particular, Dyck suggested that the *Political Register*, priced at 2d in 1816, was cheap enough to reach a wider audience of demobilised soldiers and agricultural labourers in the period of post-war scarcity after Waterloo. Vended by hawkers and sold throughout England, the *Register* promoted Cobbett's critical views about farmers and the aristocracy amongst increasingly oppressed rural labourers. Dyck also believed that Cobbett's best-selling *Cottage Economy* gave tacit approval to poaching, excise evasion and stealing food and fodder.⁸ He also suggested that Cobbett's publications were partly responsible for promoting a nostalgic view of agricultural life, a view that increasingly appeared in popular rural songs and autobiographies in the fifty years after 1780. He cited Cobbett's deep interest in the Middle Ages and believed his

⁴ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*: 441-443. See also E. P. Thompson, 'Patrician Society, Plebian Culture', *Social History* vii, (1973-1974).

⁵ Martha Vicinis, *The Industrial Muse, A Study of Nineteenth Century Working Class Literature* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974): 1.

⁶ Vicinis, *The Industrial Muse*: 186.

⁷ Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*: 18-19.

⁸ Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*: 114-115.

attempts to find hard information about the legal origins of landed property, tithes and poor rates encouraged rural labourers to sense where they stood in relation to past history.⁹ Equally significant, was Cobbett's willingness to publish engaging proverbs, songs and labourers' own memories since these tapped into a growing body of increasingly political rural labourers' ballads. Ballads in this period, in Dyck's view, now shifted in tone and instead of being genial songs about the 'countryman' and 'the husbandman', they talked frequently about the increased divide between the 'labourer' and 'the farmer'. Farmers were now described in ballads as no longer being men who worked alongside labourers in the field, but more interested in joining hunts with the aristocracy, embellishing their homes and educating their daughters to be ladies.¹⁰ Dyck also suggested that by the post-war period of agricultural depression, even seemingly cheerful ballads about agricultural labourers, like 'Jolly Fellows', became subversive. This was because the song's positive language about hard work and the pleasures of labour could be performed ironically, thus conveying the misery of rural life in a period of unemployment, underemployment and low wages.¹¹ Yet whilst it was possible to perform any ballad with nuances of tone, there is no evidence that such was the case.

Bushaway (1982) also recognised that popular culture could have provided models for socially disruptive behaviour, but he also saw it as determining the way many labourers lived their daily lives. Where popular culture was shared, it was a powerful means of binding the different elements of a community together.¹² Prior to the eighteenth century, social and economic relationships in rural villages were often based on reciprocity. This meant that those of higher rank, such as landowners and farmers, accepted certain duties for those who lived alongside them

⁹ Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*: 135. Dyck's evidence, however, is based largely on a small number of the Madden Ballads. This collection is available at the British Library, the Index at RAM 821.04 and the ballads themselves on twelve reels of micro-film at MICA 16531. The collection consists of thousands of ballads indicating popular taste and the rural ballads range from bawdy songs like *The Frolicsome Widow* to comic songs like *Hodge and his Breeches*. Although there are ballads critical of farmers and supportive of poachers, there are others praising farmers and warning of the evils of poaching. All of these appear to have been equally popular, but there is no indication of where and how they were sung or which ballads rural audiences liked best.

¹⁰ Dyck, *William Cobbett and Popular Rural Culture*: 52-55. There is little evidence that this was the case in Worcestershire. There were, however, gentleman farmers like Francis Moule of Elmley Lovett whose daughters regularly attended fashionable events in Worcester.

¹¹ Dyck, *William Cobbett and Popular Rural Culture*: 60.

¹² Bushaway, *By Rite*: 10-14.

but were structurally inferior to them, for instance: tenants, smallholders, labourers, squatters and the poor.¹³ When this balance shifted and farmers, landowners or proprietors failed to fulfil their customary duties, labourers were prepared to use customary sanctions, such as arson, in an attempt to restore the balance.¹⁴ Bushaway also argued that customs now dismissed as ‘folklore’ formed a local calendar central to rural labourers’ lives. The key seasons of Christmas, Easter and Whitsun were not simply occasions for religious observance, festivity and merriment, or about labourers showing deference in return for any gifts from local landowners or farmers. They were, he argued, important occasions when everyone within a community made an effort to ensure the happiness and well-being of all.¹⁵ For labourers, these key feasts demonstrated year in and year out that those who were better off cared about their well-being over and above their basic legal obligation to provide poor relief.

Not surprisingly, the most important festivals and customary practices took place in winter months when work was short and labourers were most dependent on parish assistance. On all of the following dates prior to Christmas, labourers traditionally walked around most rural parishes seeking out doles of food or money and these were usually given:

All Souls’	November 2 nd
St. Thomas	November 21 st
St. Clement	November 23 rd
St. Catherine	November 25 th
St. Andrew	November 30 th

When these dates were coupled with other December/Christmas celebrations involving soliciting food and money, such as carol singing, wassailing, mumming and Plough Monday it was clear that many customary practices had developed to alleviate some of the demeaning aspects of winter underemployment and unemployment. Christmas also brought the possibility of gifts of meat and game

¹³ Bushaway, *By Rite*: 22.

¹⁴ Bushaway, *By Rite*: 2.

¹⁵ Bushaway, *By Rite*: 149.

from the better off and dinners sent round to the sick and elderly, usually by the local vicar. Such festivals and feasts, therefore, had the potential to negate any anger or grievance felt by rural labourers about their employment conditions so long as those who were better off in the community were still fulfilling their customary roles.

Summer festivals, conversely, had less to do with collecting money and gift-gathering, and more to do with physical celebration and personal merry-making. May 1st was usually celebrated with May Pole dancing and garlands, whilst Whitsun was celebrated with wakes and fairs. These latter events usually involved labourers wearing their best clothes and gathering with friends and relatives to eat, drink and dance, and to watch rural sports like wrestling and cudgelling, although all these were often disapproved of by local clergymen, because there was no religious element and there was a danger of rioting, feasting and debauchery.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, Church of England clergymen tended to support celebrations that either upheld the status quo or could be linked with God's beneficence. Bushaway suggested that the Anglican Church celebrated both the Gunpowder Plot on the 5th of November and the Restoration of Charles the Second on Oak Apple Day on the 29th May, because both festivals encouraged labourers towards patriotism and pro-monarchy. He also suggested that Oak Apple Day had a deeper significance for the poor because taking sprays of oak leaves from trees to celebrate the day often preserved, in the form of ritual, the poor's right of access to woodland for the purpose of taking wood for fuel.¹⁷ The Church also promoted Rogation Week because walking the parish bounds not only taught local labourers where the official parish boundary lay but it also raised their awareness of both their Place of Settlement and the need for interlopers to be kept out.¹⁸ Of all the other festivals, however, harvest was the most important, because the Church could emphasise God's generosity whilst farmers demonstrated their reliance on the skills of their workers. Because fieldwork was hardest at this time of year, labourers expected and usually got better pay, perquisites like beer and food and a substantial feast

¹⁶ John Brand (revised Henry Bourne), *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (London: 1810): 329-330.

¹⁷ BPP, *Agriculture, Volume 1, Select Committee on Agriculture 1833*: 80.

¹⁸ Bushaway, *By Rite*: 82-84.

provided by the farmer. The harvest feast, Bushaway argued, was particularly symbolic, because the farmer, his wife and family waited on their labourers, thus reversing the normal master-servant relationship.¹⁹ He also examined the Last Labourers' Revolt in some detail and noted that the key period of unrest occurred in the winter months and often involved labourers seeking gifts of money, drink and food as a redress for local grievances. He concluded that far from being a threat of bloody insurrection with mobs trying to seize guns and stage a real revolution, the Last Labourers' Revolt was simply a demonstration of customary behaviour in which labourers sought out local farmers and landowners as the people most likely to resolve local grievances.²⁰

The fact that popular culture generated a number of disparate and diametrically opposed views required investigation, not simply because the concept of 'folklore' created a false schism in the way that some historians viewed people and their customary practices, but also because the many customs based on reciprocity and mutual well-being could have influenced labourers towards conservative behaviour that maintained the status quo. However, the fact that many labourers during the Last Labourers' Revolt sought redress through threats and violence rather than songs and dances implied that passive, socially acceptable forms of gift-gathering were either becoming things of the past or that insufficient gift-giving at a time of increased poverty had led to a wider breakdown in rural social relationships than usually presumed. This suggested that major changes in cultural attitudes took place between 1790 and 1841 which meant that labourers no longer shared a culture in common with their pastors and masters and vice versa.

Initial examination of contemporary material provided evidence of an interesting correlation between an apparent decline in rural popular culture, significant changes in rural society and the demands of a growing industrial, urban society. Viscount Torrington passing through Wallington, Oxfordshire, in 1781 noticed some Morris dancers and commented that country dancing and rural sports were rapidly becoming a thing of the past because of the influence of Methodism

¹⁹ Bushaway, *By Rite*: 125-127.

²⁰ Bushaway, *By Rite*: 191-192.

and the fashion for enclosures.²¹ A few years later, in 1784, he wrote that similar dancers seen in Cheltenham were generally despised for their ignorance²². Again, in 1792, when he was he was shown a cave at Malham, Yorkshire, which fairies were once said to inhabit, he remarked that belief in fairies was now ‘quite out of fashion’.²³ Such remarks were not simply an aristocratic view on popular antiquities, but part of a wider personal reflection on problems emergent from a rapidly growing industrial society and an apparently declining agricultural sector. Torrington was fearful about the new industrial age that was dawning largely because he believed manufactures were sucking up villages and cottages, leaving the countryside depopulated and rural life and traditions a thing of the past. His real concern, however, was based on a widespread contemporary belief that it was only in urban areas that ‘riot and discord begin’.²⁴ This view was strengthened and reinforced when he read *The Manchester Herald*, and found the paper ‘fraught with sedition and every species of rebellion’.²⁵ Nor was Torrington alone in equating a decline in rural popular culture with rising radicalism. Francis Grose writing in 1790 commented that:

Before newspapers and stage coaches had imported scepticism and made every ploughman and thresher a politician and freethinker, ghosts, fairies and witches, with bloody murder, committed by tinkers, formed the principal part of rural conversation, in all large assemblies and particularly those of Christmas holidays, during the burning of the yule log.²⁶

There were other individuals, however, who sneered at rural popular culture for very different reasons because they thought traditional customs, beliefs and superstitions were the antithesis of wealth-creating urban industrial activity. Writing in 1835, for example, Robert Dalzell said that the reason why Scotland was

²¹ Bruyn Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries*, Vol.1: 7.

²² Bruyn Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries*, Vol.1: 124 – 125. Although Torrington was displaying his prejudices and generalising, he was probably voicing the concerns of those of his own class with the same conservative opinions.

²³ Bruyn Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries*, Vol. 3. 102.

²⁴ Bruyn Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries*, Vol. 3. 33.

²⁵ Bruyn Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries*, Vol. 3. 115.

²⁶ Francis Grose, *A Provincial Glossary* (London: 1790).

‘void of ingenious arts and useful manufactures’ was its population’s widespread belief in superstitions and folk tales.²⁷ Popular culture, therefore, was under attack not simply because it was associated with superstition and ignorance, but also because it was seen as a hindrance to economic progress. Other contemporaries had similar concerns so far as labourers’ dialects were concerned and voiced fears that labourers might be using a language their superiors could not understand in order to foment unrest or spread immoral behaviour. An anonymous author, for example, compiled a common guide to the spoken language of the lower classes simply because many respectable households were employing nursemaids and servants who might be passing on immoral ideas to their young charges in a language that parents did not comprehend and that this should not go unchecked.²⁸ Conversely, the Reverend Joseph Hunter compiled *The Halamshire Glossary* in 1829, to help ‘the educated members of society’ understand the language of agricultural labourers so that they could have better conversations with them, presumably so that they could influence local labourers’ patterns of thinking and behaviour and maintain their patriarchal influence.²⁹

Evidence taken from a broad cross-section of contemporary writers indicated that many had worries and anxieties about popular culture and its impact on labourers’ ways of thinking and communicating. Their interest was inevitably tied in with contemporary factors associated with social and economic change and the fear that radical ideas were growing and developing amongst both urban and rural labourers. The original source of such worries probably lay in the French Revolution and the growth of Jacobinism in English towns and cities from the 1790s onwards. There were fears that revolutionary ideas were also spreading throughout the countryside via the printed word. Suppressing the printed word, however, was not simply a case of putting a major writer like Thomas Paine on trial for publishing *The Rights of Man*, because of its wide circulation,³⁰ it was also finding a way of dealing with a growing number of printers who had a ready market for smaller, cheaper and more easily accessible publications. In 1793, for example,

²⁷ Robert Dalzell, *Darker Superstitions of Scotland*. (London: 1835): 197-198.

²⁸ Anon. *Errors of Pronunciation and Improper Expressions used frequently and Chiefly by the inhabitants of London* (London: 1817): Preface iv.

²⁹ Reverend Joseph Hunter, *The Halamshire Glossary* (London: 1829): Introduction xiii.

³⁰ *ABG*: December 4th 1792.

the *Annual Political Songster* was published, which included radical ballads called ‘Trade at Low Ebb’. ‘Less Paper Credit’ and ‘More Tower Guineas’.³¹ In 1794, a Leicester printer was charged and sentenced to imprisonment for publishing seditious pamphlets³² and James Gleadhill, described as a reforming schoolmaster from Halifax, was given a year’s imprisonment for publishing a seditious handbill telling people to take up arms and plant the ‘Tree of Liberty’.³³

More worrying for the authorities, perhaps, was the apparent widespread distribution of political pamphlets and handbills evident across the country throughout the rest of that year. A T. Hunt was sentenced to be pilloried in Nottingham for distributing seditious handbills³⁴ and Benjamin Bull, a Bath journeyman, was sent to prison for a similar offence that October.³⁵ More significantly, so far as this study was concerned, by the mid 1790s there appeared to be a mass market for low cost publications of all types, even in rural Worcestershire. In 1795 the matter was of sufficient concern for an advertisement to be placed in *Berrow’s Worcester Journal* offering cheap moral tracts that could be circulated amongst workmen, servants and the lower classes, ‘as a substitute for those profane and indecent Songs and licentious Penny Papers which are hawked about every town and village’.³⁶ Given the climate of the times, the advertisement was probably not just about improving labourers’ moral behaviour, but trying to halt any potential influence of urban radicals who were already using popular culture genres such as ballads, songs, pamphlets and handbills to spread their political ideas.³⁷ This initiative, however, was not likely to have been a success, since it was reliant on individual sympathisers buying tracts for distribution.

³¹ *ABG*: February 17th 1793.

³² *ABG*: May 19th 1794.

³³ *ABG*: August 4th 1794.

³⁴ *ABG*: August 18th 1794. Gleadhill was probably known to be a member of a Corresponding Society.

³⁵ *ABG*: October 20th 1794.

³⁶ *BWJ*: March 23rd 1795. Again, many of the Madden ballads indicate a high number of bawdy songs in circulation. As well as *The Frolicsome Widow*, ballads like *The Little Farm*, *The Spotted Cow* and *The Rigs of Carlisle Hiring* were extremely explicit and bawdy. Songs like *The Rigs of Carlisle Hiring* were also adapted according to place and a similar version called *The Rigs of the Mops* enabled singers to insert any place name they liked. Bawdy rural ballads are more prevalent in the Madden collection than ballads critical of rural life.

³⁷ The Madden Collection has a large number of political ballads, but these appear to be linked to urban areas rather than the countryside. Ballads like *The Fat Old Parish Vestryman*, and *The Poor Law Bill in Force* have urban settings and some, like *A New Song in Praise of W. Lovett and J. Collins To be sung on the Day of their Liberation*, referred to specific causes and events.

Pedlars and ballad-singers, on the other hand, were selling their wares to a ready-made market at fairs, wakes and individual farms.

Although the widespread circulation of unstamped political printed material in both urban and rural areas was officially suppressed for a short time in the 1790s, there was a new flurry of activity in 1820 when the ‘Queen Caroline Affair’ provided a focus for further radical activity after the failure of the Cato Street Conspiracy in 1817 and the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. Handbills and ballads supporting the Queen and opposing the King were distributed nationally and displayed in some publishers’ shop windows³⁸. This led to further suppression, as in the case of John Mellors arrested at Wisbech for possessing such handbills. Mellors, a weaver, had bought a quantity of pro-Queen handbills at Norwich and was selling them en route to Nottingham.³⁹ Singling out individuals for arrest and punishment, however, failed to stem the tide. John Crane, a Bromsgrove poet, believed that inflammatory material was widely available in Worcestershire by the 1800s and that there were local ‘snakes in the grass’ spreading sedition in rural areas. These ‘snakes’ were already:

Expert among peasants
as well as mechanics,
the whispering raisers
and spreaders of panics⁴⁰

At the time of the Last Labourers’ Revolt popular cultural genre forms, such as ballads and handbills, were much in evidence in industrial areas and some market towns, although modern historians refer to these much less than ubiquitous ‘Swing’ letters. This was probably because there was no discernible link between urban political ideas and rural unrest. There was some evidence, however, that handbills were beginning to penetrate some rural areas close to larger towns. For example, in October 1830 the rector of Bratton Fleming, a small village in Devon, sent Robert Peel a handbill given to one of his servants called ‘*The Truth and*

³⁸ PRO: HO/40/14 -16. This cache of records contains handbills and ballads about Queen Caroline circulating in most parts of England. See, in particular, items 62, 86 and 195 for examples of ballads and handbills.

³⁹ PRO: HO/40/25/1/95, Letter of Hon. James Nicholls 22nd July 1820.

⁴⁰ A Bird at Bromsgrove, *Poems*: 167.

nothing but the truth', printed at Bideford, some twenty miles away. The handbill was a radical attack on the clergy and nobility and quoted Cromwell's speech dissolving the Long Parliament, much to the vicar's disgust.⁴¹ That said, there was no evidence that this spread of popular culture genres had any significant impact on rural labourers' behaviour during the riots. The Last Labourers' Revolt did not produce any evidence of Swing handbills or Swing ballads. Instead, many Swing letters were semi-literate and followed a tradition of sending anonymous threatening letters in previous times of scarcity. In two incidents in Worcestershire, Swing letters were pinned up as notices on either a church door or on the notice board of the town hall.⁴² This practice merely followed the traditional way in which church or parish officers made official announcements to the local population.

Whilst contemporary fears about revolution were understandable, it may be that undue emphasis had been placed on the way the social elite responded to radical popular culture in urban areas rather than considering what types of ballads and stories had the most significance for the majority of rural labourers. John Clare's family and neighbours in Helpstone, Northamptonshire between 1793 and 1820 inevitably provided an interesting example of how popular culture operated in one rural area and provided a benchmark for evidence relating to Worcestershire. In his autobiographical writings Clare stated that his father and his mother were both illiterate, although his father could read the Bible a little. What his father was really fond of, however, was not the collected works of Thomas Paine, nor any urban written material but penny handbills and pamphlets such as *Nixon's Prophecies*, *Mother Bunches Fairey Tales* and *Mother Shiptons Legacy* (sic). These and other melodramatic stories were bought from hawkers who sold them door-to-door when they visited the village. Clare's father was also fond of old ballads and could sing or recite over a hundred of these by heart. His mother, whilst she could not read was also great believer in witchcraft and fortune telling, as were other

⁴¹ PRO: HO/40/25/1/19, Letter to Robert Peel October 27th 1830.

⁴² PRO: HO/40/25/2/35, See letter to Viscount Melbourne from John Thomas, Mayor of Evesham.

women in the village and they passed on oral tales of ‘Jiants, Hobgoblins and faireys (sic.)’.⁴³

Clare was brought up, therefore, within a popular culture that was traditional, popularist, collective and communal. It was also one where most villagers got their key information from ‘a weekly newspaper, *Old Moors Almanac* and a Prayer Book on Sundays at Church’.⁴⁴ This limited number of sources meant that reported news, popular culture and religious instruction from their social superiors all competed with each other to provide rural labourers with a rationale of the world they lived in, although Clare’s autobiographical writings suggested that popular culture usually won. Clare, who believed himself a typical villager, provided the main evidence as to why, when he confessed his own love for, ‘the sixpenny romances of *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Zig Zag* and *Prince Cherry*’. Like many others, Clare loved happy endings and no more than when local tales and ballads told of those agricultural labourers who found fame and fortune and left their lives of rural hardship behind them forever.⁴⁵ At the same time, he also enjoyed keeping company with others and spent many evenings with neighbours, drinking ale, singing ballads and listening to stories of ghosts and witches⁴⁶ and although he managed to read the *Age of Reason* and joined the Methodists at one point, neither Paine nor Wesley dislodged his lifelong delight in popular culture.⁴⁷ He also celebrated the cyclical nature of agricultural life and the fact that every year was ‘crowned with holidays’ which included customary practices, village feasts and local dances. Such occasions gave Clare not only a strong sense of place, but also a sense of personal history and belonging and he noted that most families kept Bibles in which they recorded, ‘in rude scrawls geneoligys of the third and fourth Generations when aunts, uncles and grandmothers dyd and when cousins etc were married and brothers and sisters

⁴³ Eric Robinson (ed.), John Clare’s *Autobiographical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986): 2-3. Such reading matter, story telling, superstitions and beliefs were common elsewhere. Francis Grose referred to them being prevalent in the London area in his *Provincial Glossary* (1790) and Jabez Allies wrote about similar patterns of belief in *The Ancient British, Roman and Saxon Antiquities and Folklore of Worcestershire* (1840).

⁴⁴ Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*: 15. As a labourer with aspirations, Clare’s reading material offers an interesting link between the world of the agricultural labourer and what was being read in ‘respectable society’.

⁴⁵ Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*: 8.

⁴⁶ Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*: 42.

⁴⁷ Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*: 128.

born'. These pages, Clare added, were always preserved, even if half the book's sacred writings had been allowed to drop out and be lost completely.⁴⁸

Evidence has confirmed that Clare's upbringing and beliefs were typical of most agricultural labourers in Worcestershire, bearing in mind that popular culture and customary practices occasionally varied according to geography, local agriculture and individual locale. Although often recorded much later (and putting forgeries to one side) there was much evidence from the 1790s onwards that traditional beliefs and customary practices flourished throughout the county. Worcestershire had the same seasonal customs as most rural counties, including mumming plays, carols and songs and processions to solicit money from farmers and other villagers on the same days of the year.⁴⁹ There was also a wealth of folk tales and ballads in circulation, many of which concerned themselves with celebrating agricultural labourers' daily lives, such as *The Ploughman and the Lady*⁵⁰ and *We're all Jolly Fellows (that follow the plough)*⁵¹. Some local and more bawdier ballads were also in circulation, such as *The Enchanted Pisspot* (Hereford 1791).⁵² and customs associated with courtship and marriage took place on St Valentine's Day, May Day Eve and other times of the year.

As well as ballads and stories, there was also evidence of a wide range of popular rural sports that occasionally brought gentry, farmers and labourers together, including cock-fighting, bull-baiting, bear-baiting and dog-fights as well as feats of strength involving wrestling, fist-fighting, backsword play and shin-kicking. In Worcestershire, as in Clare's Northamptonshire, there was a long-standing belief in ghosts, witches, fairies and spells, usually associated with the idea that it was dangerous to be out anywhere after dark.⁵³ Without the means to pay for doctors, there was also a strong belief in wise men and women who were able to both cure sickness and cast or remove spells. Sometimes this was a person

⁴⁸ Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*: 33.

⁴⁹ Roy Palmer, *Britain's Living Folklore* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1991). Palmer, like most modern writers, accepts that some apparently ancient customs are either Victorian inventions or revivals e.g. the Allendale fire festival has no records prior to 1853.

⁵⁰ WCRO: BA/3762/5(i) Palfrey Collection, *Notebook* on customs in Alvechurch

⁵¹ Palmer, *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcester*: 166.

⁵² Palmer, *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcester*: 158.

⁵³ Jabez Allies, *The Ancient British, Roman and Saxon Antiquities and Folklore of Worcestershire* (1840). Second edition. (London: 1852).

of great skill, such as ‘the old doctress’ who treated the labourer Jesse Shervington, when he was badly burned as a child.⁵⁴ Others, however, were healers by reputation, as in the case of a rough farmhand who cured a farmer’s baby of ‘Throcks’ (thrush) in the early 1840s by transferring his own saliva into the child’s mouth via a dirty finger while incanting some form of muttered prayer.⁵⁵ Others, like Collins of Alvechurch, who practised in the 1810s and 1820s, were regarded as ‘wise men’ rather than healers and paid to find lost articles, provide charms against witches or reverse spells cast upon cattle.⁵⁶ The most famous wise woman during this period, however, was the white witch Rebecca Swan who lived in Kidderminster and was widely consulted by both rural and urban labourers and servants. Such was her fame that when the ill-fated Thomas Slaughter failed to answer his workmate’s question about whether he had set fire to his employer’s wheat rick, referred to in the previous chapter, the response was that he had better confess to it because his fellow worker was off to consult ‘Bet Swan’ in Kidderminster as she was sure to know!⁵⁷

Popular culture, therefore, was integral to the cohesion of most Worcestershire labourers’ lives and existing evidence suggested that this was an important counterbalance to some modern historians’ views that rural life was shaped mostly by economic circumstance and incipient class-consciousness. Rural sports were equally important, largely because they were enjoyed by both farmers and labourers and provided opportunities for socialising. Popular sports like wrestling and cock-fighting were widespread in Worcestershire and took place regularly at local venues and at the many fairs and town and village wakes throughout the county. In the 1790s most villages had an annual wake and some towns had both weekly markets and yearly fairs. In 1778, for example, John Lacey, a contemporary writer, noted that Bromsgrove had a weekly cattle market and two larger markets in June and October dealing in cattle, horses, linen, wool and cheese. There was also a Statute Fair held in the town every 27th September to hire servants for the following year which involved a sheep roast and other entertainment as well as farmers and servants contracting employment for the year ahead. Wakes were celebrated

⁵⁴ WCRO: BA/5518/1. *Autobiography of Jesse Shervington* reprinted from the *Baptist Banner* 1899.

⁵⁵ *Notes and Queries for Bromsgrove*. Vol.2. (Bromsgrove: Bromsgrove Messenger, 1909): 31.

⁵⁶ WCRO: BA/3762/5(i), *Notebook* on Customs in Alvechurch.

⁵⁷ *BWJ*: March 10th 1831. Evidence of William Collins at the trial of Thomas Slaughter.

throughout the county, mostly in July and usually included popular sports like bull-baiting, bowling and wrestling. On Shrove Tuesday, however, ‘throwing at cocks’ was a favourite activity, although extremely brutal and cruel.⁵⁸

Such sports remained popular throughout the period and Frank Wheeler, the Cleeve Prior farmer, recorded in his memorandum book for 1828 innumerable visits to fights, fairs and town wakes, all of which seemed well-attended. On 28th April, for example, he went to a fist-fight and wrestling match in the village of North Littleton, then in May he took his own cock to fight at Honeybourne Bridge, where it bled to death watched by a number of farmers and labourers. During the same month he attended several other cock-fights and went horseracing on the 30th May. On 8th July he watched backsword fighting on a stage in the market place at Wells, Somerset, and in July 1829 he attended Evesham Wake and watched backsword fighting, bowling and wrestling. Enjoyment of such events, however, was not confined to farmers and just a few lower ranking onlookers. Several retired agricultural labourers wrote to the *Evesham Journal* in the 1880s and 1890s recalling Evesham Wake with its backsword fighting and donkey races. They also remembered other village wakes which took place between 1819 and 1840, especially during Whit Week, and recalled that labourers often went from wake to wake to watch wrestling, boxing and shin-kicking.⁵⁹ Monday was Evesham Wake; Tuesday, Wickham Wake; Wednesday, Broadway Wake; Thursday, and Friday Dovers Hill Games and Saturday, Snowhill Wake.⁶⁰ Sports, wakes and fairs, then, were particularly popular with farmers and labourers, so that some well-known venues attracted farmers from some distance away.⁶¹ Even hiring fairs were not simply the equivalent of modern job centres where demoralised labourers lined

⁵⁸ *Notes and Queries for Bromsgrove*, Vol. 2: 92 and 112-113. Throwing at cocks was a widespread practice and involved the bird being tethered to a pot or partly buried. The crowd then threw stones at the cock’s head until it was dead.

⁵⁹ E.A.B. Barnard (ed.), *Evesham and Four Shires Notes and Queries*, Vol.1. (Evesham: 1911): 126 and 225. Shin-kicking involved two opponents wearing heavy nailed boots with projecting metal tips. Each man held the other’s shoulders and both kicked at the other’s shins until sufficient wounds indicated who was the winner. Backsword fighting (223) was a form of fencing played with peeled withy sticks. The winner was the first to strike the opponent on the head and draw blood. Contestants usually drank a mixture of vinegar and gunpowder to inhibit bleeding.

⁶⁰ Barnard (ed.), *Evesham and Four Shires Notes and Queries*: 225. Dovers Hill Games were particularly extensive and had a reputation for general lawlessness.

⁶¹ WCRO: BA/5044/7, *Memorandum Book 1828*. See entry 22nd April 1829. Frank Wheeler would travel considerable distances to attend cockfights and recorded farmers attending these events from villages like Belbroughton, Crabbs Cross and Rous Lench, as well as towns like Alcester.

up to be inspected by mercenary farmers to be hired and then meekly follow the farmer home. As Pamela Horn has pointed out, once a servant was hired it was usual for a farmer to give over a small advance on wages as part of the contract. The servants then took themselves off to the fair to enjoy whatever it had to offer in the way of food, drink, sport, song or sexual encounter.⁶²

Such sports and pastimes were not universally approved of locally. In 1778 John Lacey referred to cock-fighting and animal baiting at Bromsgrove as ‘disagreeable and cruel sports...used to the disgrace of humanity, scandal of Christianity and shame of our offers who suffer such shameful things to be done in our parish’. He also singled out cock throwing as one of the worst ‘wicked and abominable practices’.⁶³ Such disapproval was part of a long and consistent attack on popular culture that has been traced back to as early as 1500. As Martin Ingram has pointed out, between 1500 and 1700 many games, calendar rituals and other popular beliefs were disapproved of by both religious and secular authorities not only because of their pagan origins but because they were also associated with drunkenness and immorality.⁶⁴ In 1725, such activities were subject to a fierce attack from Henry Bourne, a Newcastle curate who, paradoxically, was one of the first people to record calendar rituals in any significant detail. Whilst Bourne accepted some activities could be regarded as innocent, he believed many were ‘a Scandal to religion and an encouraging of Wickedness’.⁶⁵ In particular, Bourne attacked fairs and wakes for promoting drinking and lewdness and all customary holidays because labourers would be better off working harder to support their families.⁶⁶ Bourne also dismissed ghost stories and omens as mere superstitions and disliked people singing traditional Christmas carols outside Church, because it was ‘generally done, in the midst of Rioting and Chambering, and Wantonness’.⁶⁷ Country Wakes were also subject to a particular attack, because they had become

⁶² Pamela Horn, *Pleasure and Pastimes in Victorian Britain* (Trowbridge: Sutton Publishing, 1999): 81.

⁶³ *Notes and Queries for Bromsgrove*, Vol. 1: 92. Equally repulsive were other sports such as biting the head off a sparrow or pulling the head off a goose.

⁶⁴ Martin Ingram, ‘Ridings, Rough Music and the “Reform of Popular Culture” in Early Modern England’. *Past and Present*. November (1984).

⁶⁵ Henry Bourne (revised John Brand), *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (London :1810): See Bourne’s original Preface.

⁶⁶ Bourne (revised J. Brand), *Observations on Popular Antiquities*: 171

⁶⁷ Bourne (revised J. Brand), *Observations on Popular Antiquities*: 202.

far removed from their original purpose in celebrating the particular saint to whom the village church was dedicated.

By 1725, Wakes days were usually celebrated on a Sunday but their primary purpose centred on family feasting and rural games like wrestling and cudgelling followed by dancing on the green. Bourne lamented the fact that every religious reference had disappeared and 'Rioting and Feasting are now all that remain'.⁶⁸ When John Brand revised Bourne's work in 1776 it has been suggested that he took a softer line on popular culture.⁶⁹ He did, however, retain Bourne's original moral criticisms and recommended in his preface that the only customs that should be retained were 'innocent Sports and Games'.⁷⁰ Repression inevitably followed and in 1787 a George III Proclamation 'For the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue and for the Preventing and Punishing of Vice' led to increasing prosecutions for Sabbath breaking and some reforming parsons beginning to put down old festivals and stop prize fights.⁷¹ Such attacks increased in the 1790s and were accompanied by the landed gentry noticeably distancing themselves from the most violent popular sporting activities. The early editions of the *Sporting Magazine* in 1792, for example, originally covered all popular sports, including cudgel play and cock-fights, but by the 1830s it concentrated entirely on horses, dogs and field sports. Hunting with hounds began to flourish and by the 1820s there were forty packs supported by the landed gentry.⁷² Since readership of the magazine appeared to remain unchanged, the content came to reflect the changing tastes of those who bought it.⁷³

Attacks on popular culture and rural sports also began to increase in Worcestershire, particularly in urban areas and market towns that became more conscious of their public image. By 1818, for example, Kidderminster's civic processions introduced banners to heighten the ceremonial and in 1822 the Council

⁶⁸ Bourne (revised J Brand), *Observations on Popular Antiquities*: 329-330.

⁶⁹ Bob Pegg, *Rites and Riots, Folk Customs of Britain and Europe* (Poole: Blandford Press, 1981): 11.

⁷⁰ Bourne (revised John Brand), *Observations on Popular Antiquities*. See Brand's preface: vii.

⁷¹ Dennis Brailsford, *British Sport, A Social History* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1992): 62.

⁷² Brailsford, *British Sport*: 64.

⁷³ As early as 1801 Joseph Strutt's *The Sport and Pastimes of England* made a distinction between 'Rural exercises practised by Persons of Rank' (which included hunting) and the 'barbarous' popular sports of bull-baiting and throwing at cocks.

attempted to ban a local custom called ‘The lawless hour’. This was the hour between the town’s High Bailiff leaving office and the arrival of the procession accompanying the next High Bailiff at the town hall. It was customary within this hour to assume no one was in authority and for the waiting crowd to pelt each other and the procession with cabbage stalks. The attempted ban led to a riot, but although the custom was reinstated and survived till the 1850s it became increasingly more genteel, and throwing apples to the crowd replaced the more unattractive cabbage stalks.⁷⁴ More significantly, perhaps, Evesham Wake and donkey races was discontinued in the town centre in 1819 after the Grand Jury of the Borough claimed that the Wake and races ‘demoralize the lower order of Society and increase pauperism’. The games, however, did not actually stop but moved venue to the nearby Gallows Hill.⁷⁵ In the same period a number of minor, but significant pieces of legislation became increasingly effective in suppressing specific aspects of popular culture. In 1799 magistrates were given the power to stop shooting on a Sunday and to fine publicans who allowed gambling to take place on their premises.⁷⁶ In 1828 a Licensing Act made it illegal for working men to play cards and dominos in public houses⁷⁷ and under an Act of 1835 cock-fighting, bull-baiting and dog-fighting were all banned.⁷⁸ During the 1820s nonconformist religion also became more noticeably puritanical and Methodists, in particular, banned their members from all attendance at village wakes and feasts.⁷⁹

Attacks on popular culture had a long history, but it was clear that they intensified between 1790 and 1830. Thompson suggested this was the result of both a general view that the poor were naturally corrupt and disposed to evil and the Methodist Revival of the war years. During the same period Sunday Schools began to flourish and William Wilberforce’s Society for the Suppression of Vice made thousands of successful prosecutions for Sabbath Breaking. Thompson saw

⁷⁴ Palmer, *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcester*: 84 and 162. See also L. Smith, *Carpet Weavers and Carpet Masters*: 208, for an account of urban sports and wakes in Kidderminster during this period. Smith also refers to the Sunday wakes held in villages around Kidderminster during this period.

⁷⁵ Barnard (ed.), *Evesham and Four Shires Notes and Queries*, Vol.1. Donkey races were also disapproved of because they encouraged gambling: 126.

⁷⁶ *ABG*: January 7th 1799 and July 25th 1800.

⁷⁷ *BWJ*: March 23rd 1828.

⁷⁸ Horn, *Pleasure and Pastimes in Victorian England*: 77.

⁷⁹ Brailsford, *British Sport*: 62.

all of this as evidence of labourers being pressurised towards personal discipline in all aspects of their lives, so that they were encouraged to adopt more sedentary hobbies like pigeon-fancying or canary breeding.⁸⁰ It was worth noting, however, that such attacks had a long history, but that this stage was particularly significant because it marked a divergence between the culture of elite groups such as, gentlemen, clergy and the middle classes and what they regarded as the vulgar pastimes of the rude unlettered masses.⁸¹

Whilst many agricultural labourers accepted these changes, the erosion of popular culture had a wider social significance. Bushaway believed that those who attacked rural sports and popular culture failed to realise that such activities made an important contribution to rural labourers' sense of well-being. He argued that popular sport and culture combined with customary rites to give labourers a meaningful role in village life other than simply being regarded as downtrodden wage-earners. Popular culture was important both as an outlet for repressed emotions and because it offered a compensatory view that traditional values were more powerful than the forces that tried to change them.⁸² This fact was not lost on contemporaries either and Pamela Horn quoted Charles Dickens's views about Greenwich Fair, which was under attack in 1836 for the licentious and rowdy behaviour of those who attended it. Dickens suggested the three day fair allowed three days of license that cooled ordinary workers' blood for six months afterwards and enabled people to go back to their daily jobs and work industriously.⁸³ More interesting, however, was an observation made by John Brand in his 1776 introduction to his revision of Bourne's *Observations on Popular Antiquities* which, at face value, simply reflects his anti-Papist rhetoric. Both Bourne and Brand observed that most popular sports and customs had derived from Roman Catholic Festivals and claimed that these had been created by the Church as 'A profusion of childish Rites, Pageants and ceremonies' which 'diverted the Attention of the People from the consideration of their real State and kept them in a

⁸⁰ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*: 442-451.

⁸¹ Martin Ingram, 'Ridings, Rough Music and the "Reform of Popular Culture" in Early Modern England', 79.

⁸² Bushaway, *By Rite*: 5-13.

⁸³ Horn, *Pleasure and Pastimes in Victorian England*: 83. The Fair was eventually banned in 1857.

humour'.⁸⁴ Had they thought a little further, both men might have realised that the same function held true in eighteenth-century rural society since popular culture provided the only diversions which kept agricultural labourers' attention away from their own deteriorating social and economic position in rural society.

It seems that the increasing attacks on popular culture in the period 1800 to 1830 had some impact on rural labourers' sensibilities and increased the awareness of a cultural divide developing between their own pleasures and aspirations and those of landowners, clergy and farmers. Yet although Bushaway was right to argue that much behaviour in the Last Labourers' Revolt could be related to customary activity, it was doubtful that the unrest was simply a reassertion of customary values through traditional forms of protest. Indeed, it would be extremely difficult to prove that labourers were overtly conscious of how popular culture contributed to local social relationships and that they had to take steps to preserve local reciprocity. In any case, many fairs, wakes and customary practices continued, despite authorities trying to limit or prescribe them. More significantly, a closer examination of some calendar behaviour and the narratives of many popular ballads in Worcestershire revealed that some aspects of popular culture were more likely to keep rural labourers compliant, because they covertly reinforced both patriarchal values and the labourer's social position in a rural hierarchical society.

Beginning with ballads, it was noticeable that very little systematic analysis of rural ballad narratives has taken place, despite similar work on urban ballads and handbills undertaken by Vicinis in *The Industrial Muse*. Instead, some historians have identified and analysed 'radical' ballads only and ignored the majority. Selectivity of this kind has skewed the analysis. It was also worth noting that whilst there were a number of universal ballads to be found in most rural areas, some local publishers specialised in specific ballad genres or published ballads based on local events to appeal to a local audience. In Worcester, for example, there were three publishers operating from separate premises: Richard Houghton, H.F. Sefton and John Butler. Whilst all sold ballads produced elsewhere, Houghton

⁸⁴ See Brand's preface: xv.

and Sefton also printed local ballads, particularly those concerned with sensational murders.⁸⁵ Although there were difficulties concerning the age and authenticity of ballads, particularly those collected from agricultural labourers in the early twentieth century, popular ballads in Worcestershire fell into the following genres:

- Carols
- Dramatic narratives
- Laments
- Wish-fulfilment
- Occupational
- Bawdy
- Current events/popular phenomenon

Significantly, none of the content of this extensive body of work was politically radical, but tended towards sentimentality and wish-fulfilment, hardly sparks to fire a labourers' revolt. More particularly, an analysis of the subtexts and subliminal messages underpinning popular ballads suggested that far from promoting discontent, the songs often supported patriarchal values and the morality of the status quo.

In the eighteenth century, Christmas carols, as already noted, were not connected with church services and were genuine ballads rather than hymns. More importantly, they bore little resemblance to later Victorian Christmas carols that have been fashioned into a modern 'ideal' of a 'traditional' Christmas service. The most popular carol in Worcestershire was *The Withy Carol* sometimes known as *The Bitter Withy* and *The Sally Twigs*.⁸⁶ Based on the traditional belief that the withy bush was unlucky it told the tale of the child Jesus being forbidden to play by a small stream in Nazareth. He disobeyed his mother and went off to play with three boys of superior birth (the sons of lords). When they made fun of his lowly origins, Jesus called on the angels to make him a bridge over the stream, which they did, enabling him to cross safely. When the three lords' sons tried to do so, however, no bridge appeared and they were drowned. When the Virgin Mary heard of this tragedy from the boys' weeping mothers she thrashed Jesus with withy twigs and Jesus cursed the withy from that day. Whilst the Church of England would

⁸⁵ Palmer, *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcester*: 188-193.

⁸⁶ *Notes and Queries for Bromsgrove*, Vol.1: 56. This is the Worcestershire version of the carol.

undoubtedly regard the content of the ballad as theologically incorrect, it clearly had a moral subtext for any agricultural labourer's child - to be content with one's lot, not to disobey one's parents and not to behave badly to social superiors.

Many popular narrative ballads as well as telling a good story also had subtexts about the rewards, or otherwise, of certain forms of behaviour. *Spare me the life of Georgie* and *Three Gypsies betrayed her* were both taken down from Mary Hayes and were learnt by her when she was a dairymaid at Upton Warren in the early 1850s.⁸⁷ Both ballads were concerned with dramatic journeys, but journeys with different outcomes. In *Spare me the life of Georgie* a lady living in London needed to get to Newcastle in order to plead for the life of her lover, sentenced to death for poaching deer. She was so desperate to save him that she even offered to sacrifice the lives of her six children if only the judge would spare him. Her pleas, however, fell on deaf ears and her lover was executed. The subtext here not only reinforced the view that the law was right to execute poachers, but also criticised the woman's heartlessness for being prepared to sacrifice her own children for the sake of saving her lover. The other ballad, *Three Gypsies betrayed her* also had a narrative based on a potential execution, but with a very different ending. The story-line here centred on a young woman kidnapped by gypsies and spirited away. Her uncle believed she had run off with her lover, but the latter knew nothing of her whereabouts. The lover then searched for her throughout England, France and Spain, before eventually finding her in an alehouse in London. They then returned home only to discover that the girl's uncle had been condemned to death, presumably for her murder. His niece, however, returned in the nick of time to save him from being executed. The subtext here was clearly about virtue being rewarded since the young lovers had not been guilty of any sexual impropriety before or during their travels and the uncle had been falsely condemned. The gypsies, of course, appeared as stereotypical thieves and kidnappers reinforcing a long-standing popular myth that was widely believed in early nineteenth century England.

⁸⁷ WCRO: BA/3762/143/I, Palfrey Collection, *Four Folk Songs from Hartlebury* collected by W. K. Clay and published by W. Hepworth, The Bull Ring, Kidderminster.

A typical example of a Lament was *Cold Blows the Wind*, another song learnt by Mary Hayes as a young woman. Typical of its genre, the ballad centred on a young woman whose lover was killed after fighting in armed combat. Every night she went to his grave to weep over it until his ghost rose at last and told her she must stop weeping because he could get no rest and it was time for her to forget him. The subtext here again centred on the virtues of fidelity and faithfulness, but the main theme of young lovers parted by death was a popular one, probably because in an age when many male agricultural labourers also died relatively young, it had a resonance that particularly appealed to young women. Ballads about wish-fulfilment, however, had almost the opposite storylines to laments and provided labourers with a fantasy counterbalance to the harsher realities of rural life. A typical local example was *The Green Mossy Banks of the Lea* taken down from William Millicheap of Crossway Green, near Elmley Lovett, who learned the song as a boy when it was sung regularly at harvest homes. The song told of a young American from Philadelphia who left home to travel in Europe. When he arrived in England he met a beautiful young woman and fell in love with her. When he asked for her hand in marriage he assured her father he was worth £10,000 a year. His proposal was accepted, the couple married and the rich young husband instantly built his new wife a castle and they both lived happily ever after. The final verse concluded:

So now all pretty maid pay attention
Who knows what your fortune will be
For there's many a dark cloudy morning
Brings forth a sunshiny day

The moral lesson, again, appeared to be quite clear – young women should stay at home, be content with their lot and then virtue might reward them with a rich husband who could well appear out of the blue and transform their lives forever.

In many ways, ballads of wish fulfilment were more representative of agricultural labourers' tastes rather than complaints about the severity of their lot in life. Even the simplest type of ballad, *Three Jolly Fellows*, carried the message that a hard day's work on the farm was at the very least bound to be rewarded by

farmers with, 'a jug of my bonny brown ale'.⁸⁸ Another local ballad *The Ploughman and the Lady*, however, had a much more interesting subtext. Although only a fragment of this ballad survived the narrative concerned a ploughman who had just proposed marriage to a lady. Before she accepted she asked what he could provide for her as:

I can neither knit nor spin
Nor help you gather the harvest in

His response was that she would not have to, because he was good at both ploughing and harvesting. He then told her that she would want for nothing, providing that it could be bought with his pay of 'nine pence every day'. Hearing this news, not surprisingly, the lady turned the ploughman down saying that his wages would not be enough to supply her with silks and satins and a coach to take the air.⁸⁹ The subtext here could be interpreted as a radical critique of the aristocratic lifestyle compared to the ploughman's and nowadays it might well be sung with irony. That said, the simpler explanation was that this was yet another ballad which reinforced rural labourers' traditional moral values by emphasising that hard work and thrift were superior to the aristocratic life style of luxury and indolence. A ploughman might well dream of marrying a lady, but if he did he would soon find himself tied to a glamorous squanderer rather than to a thrifty helpmeet more suitable to his social rank in life.

There was also a moral message for labourers in the Hereford ballad *The Enchanted Pisspot*, a satirical song concerning a farmer enlisting the help of a wise man to find out if his wife had been unfaithful. The wise man cast a spell which caused both the farmer's wife and the parish clerk who was cuckolding him to stick to a chamber pot and dance through the town in their nightwear. The spell was only lifted when the clerk agreed to pay the farmer £10 in compensation.⁹⁰ The subtext of this song, however, was not simply poking fun at the farmers in general, but also reinforcing the inevitable punishment of public exposure for anyone defying the moral conventions of the countryside. The ballad simply moralises in

⁸⁸ Palmer, *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcester*: 166.

⁸⁹ WCRO: BA/3762/5 (i) Palfrey Collection : Notebook on Customs in Alvechurch, *The Ploughman and the Lady*.

⁹⁰ Palmer, *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcestershire*: 158.

song what the Skimmington ride or ‘rough music’ did in reality when villagers went in a mocking procession to pursue local adulterers or wife beaters, often singing songs and banging pots and pans together in the process.⁹¹

Finally, the category of ballads based on local events was exemplified by a Worcestershire ballad called *The Lamentation of James and Joseph Carter*. This told how two unemployed agricultural labourers from Bewdley robbed a farmer going home from Kidderminster market to Rock in 1833. Because they stole a £5 note they were sentenced to death, although this sentence was later commuted to transportation. Whilst the narrative accepted that unemployment was unfortunate, the brothers’ motive for the robbery was not to buy food or to support their families, but to get money to spend on women and drink. The moral message came in the last verse of the ballad, with a call to others not to give in to temptation:

So all young men a warning take who hath sweet liberty
And for two dying sinners sake, shun harlots company
For they will soon your pleasure blast, and prove your overthrow
And then like us you will get launched into the gulph of woe⁹²

An examination of popular culture in Worcestershire inevitably proved somewhat inconclusive. On the one hand, some rural sports and calendar customs were under general attack, suggesting an erosion of social relationships, but they continued to thrive at a local level. This meant that village wakes, cock-fights and backsword fighting still provided opportunities for farmers and labourers to share common interests and socialise together up to and including the year of the Last Labourers’ Revolt. Although Cobbett might have lamented that that the good old days of farmers mixing with their labourers were all in the past, this was not always the case in Worcestershire. More significantly, perhaps, the most popular ballads in rural Worcestershire were more likely to maintain and reinforce conservative values rather than promote radicalism and rural discontent. George Griffiths, who lived in Bewdley in the 1830s and 1840s, recalled going to Bridgnorth May Day Fair and watching a local ballad seller vend his wares. Griffiths noted that although the

⁹¹ Ingram, ‘Ridings, Rough Music and the “Reform of Popular Culture” in Early Modern England’, 86.

⁹² Palmer, *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcester*: 192-193.

seller was offering a range of comic and tragic ballads for sale the agricultural labourers' favourite was the old carol of *Dives and Lazarus*.⁹³

It was anticipated that linking popular culture to the villages chosen for this particular study would prove difficult, since surviving evidence was likely to be more scanty and disparate. There was virtually no evidence relating to Elmley Lovett other than the fact that William Collins and Thomas Slaughter knew of the existence of Rebecca Swan at Kidderminster, probably by word of mouth, and clearly believed in her magical powers. There was also no surviving evidence of any seasonal calendar activity in the village or of the squire or the parson making any festive gifts or doles to the poor in the neighbourhood. There were two church endowed schools in the parish which might have offered an education in conservative moral values, but apart from some labourers' children being taught the Catechism, reading and writing, there was little evidence that education played a significant part in their lives and most children were removed early from school in order to begin their working lives in the fields.⁹⁴ Indeed, by the early 1850s the two schools were heavily criticised by George Griffiths for failing to play any significant role educating poor children in the parish. The school at Elmley Lovett itself was described as 'grim' whilst the school at Cutnall Green was thought to be the worst the writer had ever visited. There were only a few labourers' sons in the school and few of these could read or write properly. The schoolroom itself had writing desks falling apart with decay, wooden windows and ink-bottles suspended from bacon hooks attached to the ceiling.⁹⁵ All one can deduce from this information was that agricultural labourers' children in Elmley Lovett and Cutnall Green were scarcely literate and were taught in poor learning environments. There was no evidence, however, that popular culture provided a more influential alternative to elementary education since no local commentators were concerned with or interested in any popular sports or culture surviving in the village during the period 1790 to 1830.

⁹³ George Griffith, *Going to Markets and Grammar Schools*, Vol. 1. (London: 1870): 238. 239.

⁹⁴ WCRO: BA/9845, Rector's response to the Bishop of Worcester's queries relating to education in Elmley Lovett 1761. Many farmers felt, in any case, that two years' schooling, from 5 to 7 years old, was quite sufficient for labourers' children.

⁹⁵ George Griffiths, *The Free Schools of Worcestershire* (London: 1852): 196-197.

Inkberrow itself was more interesting regarding popular culture since Frank Wheeler's brother John was the landlord at the Bull Inn and this was a major venue for cock-fighting in the area in the late 1820s and early 1830s. But although this venue was well-frequented by local farmers from Alcester, Belbroughton and Rous Lench and even one or two gentlemen, there was no evidence of many agricultural labourers being an integral part of their company.⁹⁶ There was little evidence either of any other popular sports and customs taking place in the parish other than the existence of a troop of Morris dancers⁹⁷ and some contemporary references to parishioners having a strong belief in fairies.⁹⁸ Given that this was a parish with a large number of squatters, it is also possible that customary practices were not shared universally, since it was unlikely that 'respectable' labourers would have socialised with the impecunious Chattaways of the Ridgeway or the impoverished residents at Stock Wood.

Powick, however, did offer some interesting evidence suggesting that some significant changes to popular sports and customs did take place during this period being investigated and that this could be connected with local discontent. As already noted, although villagers were able to maintain customary rights over the common fields, the select vestry in Powick tried to change customary practices persistently and by the 1820s had managed to enclose part of Old Hills Common causing evident anger of some local labourers. During this period the vestry also managed to adapt St Thomas' Day and other customary festivals by incorporating them into what had become an increasingly harsh system of poor relief. St Thomas' Day held on December 21st was one of the key dates when the poor were able to walk around the parish to solicit gifts, a practice almost universally acknowledged and adhered to. For example, throughout his long incumbency at Weston Longville, Norfolk, from 1776 to 1803, James Woodforde gave regularly to the village poor on St. Thomas' Day, shared his Christmas dinner with the poor and welcomed mummers and callers on other occasions. On St Thomas' Day 1785, for example, he recalled that a great many people from the parish called on him and

⁹⁶ Belbroughton was some distance away from Inkberrow.

⁹⁷ Palmer, *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcestershire*: 232.

⁹⁸ Allies, *The Ancient British, Roman and Saxon Antiquities and Folklore of Worcestershire*: 419.

that he gave them all 6d each⁹⁹ and ten years later he gave 6d each to the 52 poor people who visited on December 21st.¹⁰⁰ In 1784, an advertisement on December 14th in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* called for the well-to-do to give generously on St Thomas' Day the following week because it had been a year of particular scarcity. The advert also suggested making gifts of potatoes and butchers' meat as well as gifts of grain to make bread.¹⁰¹ During the same period the Poor Law accounts for Powick revealed that St Thomas' Day was also seen as a day when gifts should be made as an 'additionality' rather than just giving normal payments as part of the legal relief system. For example, in 1793 several poor people in the workhouse were given the gift of a shilling on St Thomas Day and all were treated to a parish dinner.¹⁰² Those in the workhouse were also given a special meal on Christmas Day and Easter Monday. By 1829, however, all this had changed and the select vestry ordered that any surplus parish charity money available on St Thomas' Day should be distributed only to the deserving poor recommended by the vestry. It was also ordered that all those on poor relief be assembled in the church on St Thomas' Day itself and told that in future the vestry would be drawing up a list of everyone on relief with notes on their characters and that a separate list would be kept of anyone applying for help from parish charities 'known to be leading idle and disreputable lives.' Future relief for these was to be dependant not only on recommendation, but also changes in their character and behaviour.¹⁰³

What the Powick select vestry had managed to do, in keeping with its increasing tendency to offer poor relief in harsher terms, was to change the character of a key customary calendar festival so that it was no longer what Bushaway might call a traditional activity that demonstrated social and economic reciprocity. Instead St Thomas' Day in Powick ceased to be an occasion when the socially superior accepted and demonstrated their duty towards the structurally inferior.¹⁰⁴ What should have been a day of customary giving was dislocated and

⁹⁹ John Beresford (ed.) James Woodforde, *The Diary of a Country Parson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978): 262.

¹⁰⁰ Beresford (ed.) *Diary of a Country Parson*: 515.

¹⁰¹ *ABG*: December 14th 1794.

¹⁰² WCRO: BA/3802/1b, Powick Overseers Accounts 1793.

¹⁰³ WCRO: BA/5540/3, Parish Order Book, 10th December 1829. This local behaviour probably reflected greater scrutiny at a national level.

¹⁰⁴ Bushaway, *By Rite*: 22.

reformed into an integral part of the select vestry's harsh system of poor relief. Since members of the vestry were themselves from the social elite, it also represented a shift in their own personal attitudes towards customary practices. That said, it has already been noted that there was no evidence of any unrest at Powick between 1830 and 1831 so it may be that this one marked change in customary practice had little immediate impact on local labourers' cultural mores and perceptions. In any case, individual and collective consciousness did not change overnight and popular culture was only a part of a labourer's life experience and therefore could not realistically be separated from issues to do with agricultural change, work and social relationships.

Popular culture has not always been given sufficient attention by modern historians largely because of the false coinage of the word 'folklore' in 1848. During the period 1790 to 1840 there was no such thing as folklore, nor was there any customary behaviour that vicars and antiquarians were fond of calling 'popular antiquities'. What existed in reality were simply popular rural sports and customary practices that were increasingly under attack from religious and economic vested interests. In the end, however, as Brailsford and Pamela Horn have both noted, these vested interests won the day. Brailsford detected a movement towards 'Rational Recreation' by the 1840s with rural sports now being regulated and a push to encourage sedate walks, country dancing and gymnastic exercises as more acceptable alternatives to wrestling, fist-fights and backsword fighting, now seen as crude and brutal rural activities.¹⁰⁵ By the Victorian period, some old style rural celebrations clung on, but they were increasingly regarded as uncivilised and irrelevant, crude and pointless.¹⁰⁶ Although more research on the Midlands needs to take place, there was evidence that popular sport and culture were on the wane with events in or close to large urban towns being the first to be discontinued. For example, Handsworth Wake near Birmingham was cancelled in 1832 after a petition from respectable inhabitants claimed it would help spread cholera.¹⁰⁷ In 1845 Derby's clergymen, businessmen and some of the respectable working-classes complained that the town's annual Shrovetide football match

¹⁰⁵ Brailsford, *British Sport, a Social History*: 70.

¹⁰⁶ Horn, *Pleasure and Pastimes in Victorian England*: 74.

¹⁰⁷ *ABG*: October 8th 1832. Although this was in keeping with attempts to resist the spread of cholera elsewhere, it was noticeable that the petition did not refer to other types of public assembly.

always led to ‘a lawless rabble’ assembling to damage property and to participants being led increasingly into ‘moral degradation’. It was banned the following year.¹⁰⁸ Elsewhere, although some Worcestershire wakes and fairs in county towns continued to survive, they never ceased to be under attack. The Reverend E. Jackson, the Herefordshire Diocesan Inspector of Schools in 1860 condemned all mop fairs as ‘orgies and revels’ whilst the Worcester Superintendent of Police accused the St. John’s Mop of providing an occasion when ‘young women are trapped by procuresses’.¹⁰⁹

This chapter has focused on attempts to establish links between rural patterns of protest and popular culture in order to restore a lost area of agricultural history to its rightful place in historical research. Existing evidence indicated that rural sports and calendar customs played a significant role in agricultural labourers’ lives, not only as a possible outlet for repressed emotions and a channel for anger, but also as a means of sharing collectively in the social life of a community. During the period in question, however, popular culture was under attack and attempts at suppression or trying to make customary practices more dignified created a vacuum that enabled some labourers to get a better understanding of their economic and social position. There were also more subtle yet discernible shifts in social relationships that took place as the landed gentry gradually dissociated themselves from popular sports and moved into the exclusive area of field sports such as hunting, shooting and fishing. There were also, no doubt, individual farmers, tired of supplying ‘perks’ on top of their poor law contributions, and some local evidence at Powick that customary practices were partly subsumed into the existing relief system by new moral codes advocating decent behaviour and a more disciplined work ethic. In Worcestershire overall, however, there was little evidence that popular culture played any significant role in rural protest or the Last Labourers’ Revolt. It is also probable that popular culture was still strong enough to satisfy labourers’ wish-fulfilment, thereby reinforcing the status quo rather than aiding radical politics. This may partly explain why Swing activity was less apparent in Worcestershire than it was in some counties. From the 1830s onwards,

¹⁰⁸ Horn, *Pleasure and Pastimes in Victorian England*: 76.

¹⁰⁹ Palmer, *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcester*: 177. No evidence was cited for why he held this belief, but mop fairs had a reputation for sexual licence and no doubt respectable citizens were prepared to believe in any lurid rumours associated with them.

however, popular sport and culture continued to decline until all that was left was a residue, with local dialects being amongst the strongest survivors. Such dialects are worthy of further analysis since the words that survive still provided an insight into how rural labourers interpreted the world around them. In the 1890s, Worcestershire words and phrases still contained references to late surviving customary practices such as harvest home, Restoration Day and dancing round the May Pole, as well as old remedies for curing sore eyes and whooping cough that were still being practised.¹¹⁰ There were also dozens of words still in use that captured attitudes to family life, neighbourliness and the natural world that villagers saw around them on a daily basis. More significantly perhaps, there were innumerable words, phrases and superstitions relating to good and bad luck that agricultural labourers saw as ever present in the natural world and in the local community. These suggested a certain amount of fatalism in the rural labourers' mindset and indicated that economic and social changes may have been accepted with stoicism rather than resisted with violence.¹¹¹ Rural labourers in Worcestershire, when they were not driven into social protest in years of extreme dearth and high prices, put more faith in good and bad luck perhaps than they ever did in overt protest or radical politics.

George Sturt, writing in 1912, noted that labourers in his home village of Bourne had 'an instinctive fatalism', where they took their fate for granted without harbouring resentment against those more fortunate.¹¹² Yet in spite of such fatalism, or perhaps because of it, some labourers could display a deep sense of anger and indignation when some years later they were able to reflect on what they felt they had lost. When Bourne met an old road mender one day and began a conversation with him, he heard the life story of a man who had once been a skilled farm-labourer, but whose experience in thatching and mowing were no longer in demand. Seemingly philosophical about a life of changing fortunes and the fact that age was forcing him to give up even road mending, Bourne and his companion reached a forested area and conversation turned to the fact that in the labourer's

¹¹⁰ Jesse Salisbury, *A Glossary of Words and Phrases used in S.E. Worcestershire* (London: 1893).

¹¹¹ Salisbury, *A Glossary of Words and Phrases*: 72.

¹¹² Sturt, *Change in the Village*: 70.

youth this had been unenclosed common. Bourne later wrote of his surprise and shock at the old man's reaction.

Pointing to the wood which could be seen beyond the valley, he said spitefully, while his eyes blazed: "I can remember when all that was open common, and you could go where you mind to. Now 'tis all fenced in, and if you looks over the fence they locks you up. And they en't got no more *right* to it, Mr Bourne, than you and me have! I should *like* to see they woods all go up in flames!"¹¹³

¹¹³ Sturt, *Change in the Village*: 73.