

Social unrest comes to the Soulbury area

In 1873 Soulbury the people of Soulbury found themselves in an uncomfortable situation as sharp and often uncompromising conflict between agricultural labourers and farmers swept across the eastern counties and the south midlands. They read about it in the Leighton Buzzard Observer or heard about events in village after village, which were visited by 'agitators' from the National Agricultural Labourers Union. These activists were urging labourers to join the union in support of a pay claim and limit on working hours. Gradually in 1873 the 'agitators' came closer and closer to Soulbury. In the villages they visited, men were being invited at often boisterous meetings to join in what was a very radical expression of solidarity alien to village life. Individuals were going to have to decide whether to join the union or not, and if necessary whether to go on strike. It would put the workingmen and their families of a village in direct conflict with their employers who were their neighbours. It looks like the 'agitators' did not visit Soulbury but they were active in the neighbouring villages of Wing and Stewkley among many others.

A wave of open-air meetings spread throughout Buckinghamshire and neighbouring counties in 1872 and 1873. They were addressed by leading members of the National Agricultural Labourers Union who typically told the labourers present things they already knew, that they were underpaid and badly treated. The meetings ended with a pressing invitation to join the union.

Farmers were often present at the meetings, which sometimes broke down into open hostility between labourers and farmers. However, it is evident that tenant farmers, in particular, sometimes sided with the protesting labourers. Some meetings ended in running fights with serious injuries. At Yaxley, in Huntingdon, for example, farmers with some strong men arrived at a labourers meeting intent on breaking it up. The labourers tried to ignore them but being severely provoked they turned on the farmers, who being outclassed in a dogfight ran into the town. They were hunted down by the labourers who beat them up.

Some meetings were better managed leading to peaceful outcomes. One such was at Woburn on the 14th April 1873 where the Duke of Bedford gave permission for the union to use the Town Hall and he showed active support for finding a peaceful resolution of the union's demands.

With the Leighton Buzzard Observer telling of such meetings almost every week it must have seemed inevitable to the people of Soulbury that the agitators and the conflict which attended them were heading their way.

The issue of trade unionism was usually referred to by the Leighton Buzzard Observer and other newspapers as 'The Labour Movement' or 'The Labour Question'. The issue at its simplest was whether workers should be allowed to band together to form trades unions in order to fight for better pay and conditions. Further questions followed about what union's rights and responsibilities should be if they were legalised. Editions of the Leighton Buzzard Observer and other local papers frequently contained long and often convoluted letters addressing the 'Labour Question'.

When the Tolpuddle Martyrs were transported to Australia in 1833 for forming a union of farm labourers news travelled fast throughout rural England. The injustice done was within living memory of those older men who worked as agricultural labourers in Soulbury in the mid 1860's. They included men such as Joseph Whiting of Bragenham, Francis Collier of Rammemere, John Robinson of Great Hollingdon and Samuel Orchard of Soulbury village. They were old enough to have been adult farm labourers when the Dorset men were transported. By the mid 1860's social reformers were winning the battle to get unions legally established. When a Royal Commission, which was seen to be sympathetic to Unions, was set up in 1866 an unsuccessful initial attempt was made to form a farm labourers union in Buckinghamshire, ahead of Parliament deciding to legislate in their favour.

The Trade Union Act of 1872 gave the go ahead for the formal establishment of trades unions under terms that defined how they should be formulated and how they should conduct themselves. In a number of localities agricultural labourers formed 'independent' local unions ahead of the Act. In May 1872 Joseph Arch, a lay Primitive Methodist preacher from Leamington Spa, led the formation the National Agricultural Labourers Union. In months it would rapidly grow into a major social and economic force. The landowners and farmers in Soulbury knew that well prepared demands for higher wages would follow from men who were organised within a national framework.

In 1871 and 1872 people in Soulbury would have been well aware that a former schoolteacher of Dinton, just west of Aylesbury, was travelling round the villages north of Aylesbury and as far east as Stewkley and Wing. He was promoting the idea of forming branches of the national farm labourers union in their area and he was getting very close to Soulbury. He was Edward Richardson, who earned the name of the 'Aylesbury Agitator' or the 'Buckinghamshire Agitator'. His style was forceful, emotive and articulate. He was high on rhetoric. Tones of revolutionary socialism and Old Testament morality ran strongly throughout his long speeches as he urged his audiences to take action.

No report has been found that he spoke at Soulbury. This was probably because he seems to have visited villages that had Primitive Methodist chapels with strong memberships. There was no such chapel in Soulbury. It seems that Primitive Methodists in the parish attended the nearest chapel in a neighbouring village or town. Primitive Methodists in the west of Soulbury such as at Hollingdon are known to have been members at Stewkley chapel. Perhaps those in the south found it easier to attend Primitive Methodist chapel in Wing or Linslade, and others in Braggenham and in the west of the parish would have gravitated to chapel in Leighton Buzzard. The assumption may be made that in being so dispersed, Soulbury 'Primitives' were divided into small separate groups, which were in different chapel circuits. Perhaps this lack of coherence was one of the reasons why farm labourers in Soulbury do not appear to have been unionised at that time. It may also be that the farmers in Soulbury paid slightly better wages than in other villages.

The labourers of Soulbury were aware of unrest among agricultural labourers elsewhere as reports started to appear in the Leighton Buzzard Observer with some frequency in spring 1872. In May 1872 the paper told of agitation for strikes in Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire and they printed an article on the conditions of agricultural labourers in Bedfordshire. The theme of the article was that farm labourers in Bedfordshire were well paid compared with those elsewhere so they should know when they were well off and not join a union. In October 1872 the Leighton Buzzard Observer printed a letter from Reverend Ouvry, the vicar of Wing, which commented on a recent meeting of agricultural labourers held at Aylesbury. In December 1872 the paper reported in detail that Edward Richardson, the 'feared' leader of the Buckinghamshire farm workers union, had spoken to a meeting at Wing. In January 1873 they reported further on the busy life of Richardson who addressed meetings at Cublington, North Marston and again at Wing. Richardson may not have been speaking in Soulbury but

he was getting very close and undoubtedly his words were heard by Soulbury men.

Farm labourers in Soulbury knew that there was a particular sense of injustice felt by their fellow labourers in Swanbourne. Two labourers from there were said to have been imprisoned at Aylesbury gaol as a result of a dispute over the management and ownership of the allotments that had been created for labourers use. Insider knowledge of events at Swanbourne would have spread fast to Soulbury, as there were some kinship ties of farmers and labourers between the two parishes. Also anxieties may have spread to Soulbury where there were similar allotments on Wainscott Common set aside for the use of agricultural labourers. They were on poor land on the other side of the road from the Red Lion at Hollingdon.

Primitive Methodists throughout the area were playing a significant part in making the case for improvements in labourers' conditions and promulgating action. The discontented Swanbourne agricultural labourers were largely Primitive Methodists. Some labourers and their families from Soulbury attended the Primitive Methodist chapel at Stewkley, which was closely connected to the Swanbourne chapel. Given this there would have been some suspicions amongst Soulbury farmers that militancy might spread to Soulbury. This suspicion may have been heightened by the fact that in 1870 and 1871 the Primitive Methodists had been very active in Soulbury (notably in Hollingdon) evangelising and promoting their brand of Methodism.

In Spring 1873 about a half of the labourers at Swanbourne went on strike when what passed for 'negotiations' between the union and the farmers and landowners broke down. The strikers tried to spread their message and generate support by touring the surrounding villages. This brought them to Stewkley where there was a good turn out, possibly including some men from Soulbury.

However, the strike didn't spread and it fizzled out within three weeks. Some strikers were bought off. They accepted less than the extra 3 shillings per week the union was demanding. The offer of the pay rise was on the understanding that the labourers who accepted it would quit the union. Others just didn't have the financial reserves or heart to continue with their action. A couple of the strike leaders were sacked. One leader, Joseph Tattam, was some time later allegedly roughed up in the street in Aylesbury on the orders of a local landowner. He died a year or so after the assault possibly from the injuries he received.

News of the failure of the Swanbourne strike spread quickly by mouth to surrounding villages including Soulbury where it was not repeated. Labourers there did not learn of the Swanbourne strike through the local papers. It is perhaps surprising that despite the open hostility of the local press to unions there is no mention of the Swanbourne strike in any of the local papers!

It was falsely reported by the anti-union Buckinghamshire Herald that many of the strikers had fled the area emigrating to Australia following recent adverts in the local press for assisted passages to Queensland. A good number of labourers from Buckinghamshire did take up this invitation to emigrate but only two were union members from Swanbourne. One of the men behind the strike – Edward Richardson – went with them lending support for the view put forward by the press that he had led them into a pointless action and was now ‘escaping’..... like a rat’. That was how it appeared but he was following National Union policy of actively promoting the mass emigration of labourers, which the Union thought would drive up the price of labour in England.

The Buckinghamshire Herald was quick to speak against the activities of agitators, who they said created discontent and revolt. In April 1873 the paper quoted from an unspecified article which described the principal agitators as ‘.....communistic in politics and infidel in religion...’ ‘Communistic’ may refer to agitators’ well-known support for movements campaigning for a fair distribution of land ownership. The Union frequently argued for labourers being given four or five acres of land to be taken from the landowning nobility. ‘Infidel’ may be an oblique reference to the way that agitators usually vehemently castigated the clergy and especially the bishops for being against the union.

Karl Marx wrote in support of the unionisation and strikes of the agricultural labourers in England at this time. It was significant that it was the workers on the land and not those in factories that formed the first legal unions and undertook the first wave of strikes. He saw them as the vanguard of the revolution that was inevitable in a capitalist society.

The Buckinghamshire Advertiser demonised Richardson, describing his language as immoderate, and by sneering at his journey to Queensland with the emigrating Buckinghamshire labourers in 1873. They were bound by the terms of their free or assisted passage to remain in Australia but Richardson was free to return, which he did after only a

short stay there. When Richardson spoke at Wing the meeting was chaired by the Reverend Ouvry, vicar of Wing. At a later meeting, Richardson went out of his way to praise Ouvry for his civility and apparent empathy with Richardson's mission. This pointed to an often open conflict between the church and unions in the area. It was not uncommon for vicars to think that it was their role to protect the poor labourers in their flocks from exploitative farmers. They said that they could do this by persuading local farmers to pay higher wages and by resolving tensions between labourers and farmers they would maintain the social order. By turning to unions the labouring man was embarking on a journey into conflict, discord and disruption that would not be to their advantage or that of their families and would undermine the long established harmonised life of the village.

In response to growing union militancy in early 1873, farmers began to organise themselves into groups, generally referred to as 'farmers defence groups'. Locally a farmer's group was formed in Dunstable, which included some farmers from just across the Soulbury parish boundary in Leighton Buzzard and Woburn. Indeed some of the farmers in the east of the parish had land that was in Bedfordshire. Another group was formed around Aylesbury. Farmers in Soulbury could well have been members of either group. The Dunstable group of farmers, calling themselves 'The United Farmers Association', initially agreed to pay a uniform weekly rate to labourers and then set about creating binding measures to counteract strikes and to provide mutual support for members in the event of strike action. Members of the Association were bound to dismiss ('lock out' as they called it) any labourer who joined the Labourers' Union. Other members were bound to help source non-union labour to replace those who had been 'locked out'. It was a robust and punishing set of strategies employed by most farmers associations across the country, which in the end would crush the Union. 'Lock outs' were at their height in 1874. In 1873 and 1874 some 10,000 labourers nationally lost their jobs and as a direct consequence were evicted from their homes.

Members of the Aylesbury Farmers group were involved in 'locking out' union members in 1874. The Labourers' union held a demonstration in support of locked out men in Aylesbury town centre on 18 July 1874. Each man wore a label on his hat saying 'locked out' and he wore his blue rosette, which was a symbol of union membership. One of the locked out men spoke out about his situation. The 'agitator' Richardson then explained to the watching crowd how the men had been victimised by the farmers and the financial support that they were receiving from the

union. A public collection was attempted. The event passed off rather noisily.

In 1873 and 1874 leading members of the Labourer's union sought to make their case at public meetings in Leighton Buzzard. In July 1873 an open-air meeting was held in front of the old town hall in Leighton Buzzard. It was addressed by National Secretary of the union. It turned into a near riot resulting in the speaker and his associates being run out of town by a large, stone throwing mob of five hundred people that chased them to the railway station in Linslade. They escaped being beaten up by being locked into a carriage of a train that happened to be waiting in the station. The stationmaster at first refused them entry to the train, as they didn't have tickets, but then seeing the five hundred rioters trying to get over the narrow footbridge to the platform he saw sense and locked the fleeing union men in a carriage. As the train left the station the Union leader opened the window and shouted at the mob that he would be back!

In April the following year a local official of the union tried again to hold a public meeting in Church Square. It too ended in uproar with the speaker hiding in a locked pub before escaping on a fast driven cart. It would seem that amongst the folk of Leighton Buzzard there were those who were ready to stop agitators in their tracks.

However, a month later the union did succeed in holding an orderly public meeting at Leighton Buzzard. By then the success of the 'lock outs' by farmers in counteracting unions was well established. The local newspaper's reports of these three meetings sneered at the language, appearance and organisational skills of the union speakers presenting them as pantomime characters.

A couple of years later the Leighton Buzzard Observer adopted a very different tone when they offered a lengthy narrative of the visit of Joseph Arch, the national leader of the farm labourers union, to Wing in 1876. He was hero worshipped by over a thousand people – some from Soulbury - who attended an open-air gathering near the Cock Inn. There is almost an echo of Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem in the paper's description of Arch's staged arrival at Wing and his being hailed and feted by the crowds. Was that a ruse that the paper intended and something that Arch, the lay preacher, would have approved of?

By the time that Arch spoke at Wing in 1876 the National Union of Agricultural Labourers was in terminal decline. Membership was

dropping rapidly and strikes were few and far between. 'Lock outs' by farmers groups had been effective in frightening individuals from union membership and many farmers groups were paying significantly better wages to keep their good workers happy.

No mention has been found of the formation of a farm labourer's group in Soulbury. Perhaps there was no leadership there to set one up or the farmers got smart and paid higher wages to avert threats of a strike as was the case in many places. One of the famers in Soulbury at the time was Henry Belgrove. The Belgrove family also farmed at Swanbourne. None of the Belgrove's men went on strike there.