

The Incidence and Organization of Agricultural Trades Unionism in the 1870's

By J. P. D. DUNBABIN

IN the summer of 1872, when the world suddenly seemed to lie at the agricultural labourers' feet, excited speakers made a number of irresponsible claims about their progress. The most remarkable that I have encountered was to the effect that Warwickshire alone had 150,000 union members, and the country as a whole 600,000. On a more formal occasion, however, members were claimed only in the majority of counties between Lincolnshire and Devon.¹ As Table I attempts to show, the second claim was the more accurate. And in the course of this article, I hope first to explore some reasons for this incidence of agricultural trades unionism, then to examine the importance of purely local factors, and finally to discuss the way in which the unions were really organized.

Of the more material demands of agricultural trades unionism, the most frequently voiced were those relating to wages, land, and housing. So one might expect to find the key to its incidence in an examination of regional variations of these three factors. But with only limited success—for such variations were more visible, and therefore probably more influential, at the village rather than the regional level.

Indeed, at county level there seems to have been no particular correlation between the quantity of rural housing in 1871 and the incidence of rural discontent; also houses were at least more plentiful in the country than in the towns.² Of their quality one can only speak impressionistically, but it is likely that it improved in stone districts and in the north. It has also been suggested that areas of nucleated villages were more conducive to, and better able to support, trades unionism than were those of scattered hamlets.³ This

¹ *Oxf. Chron.*, 3 Aug. and 26 Oct. 1872. The following abbreviations will be used in this article: *Dors. Exp.*, for *Dorset County Express*; *Heref. T.*, for *Hereford Times*; *Lab. U. Chron.*, for *Labourers' Union Chronicle*; *Oxf. Chron.*, for *Oxford Chronicle*; *P.P.*, for *Parliamentary Papers*.

² The ratio of people to inhabited houses exceeded the England and Wales average in rural Surrey, Sussex, and Hants., equalled it in Kent, Monmouthshire, Durham, and Westmorland, and approached it in Northumberland, Cumberland, Cheshire, Lancs., and Staffs. The ratio was substantially better than average in other counties.—*P.P.*, 1873, LXXI, pt 2, pp. 26 ff.

³ See e.g. *P.P.*, 1893-4, XXV, pp. 321-2, 339.

TABLE I*
MEMBERSHIP FIGURES OF AGRICULTURAL TRADES UNIONS

1874	1875	1879
<i>Lincs.</i>		
Market Rasen 1,820	1,126	800
South Lincs. 1,300	1,150	(Spalding not available)
<i>Lincolnshire and Neighbouring Counties Amalgamated Labour League</i>	<i>League total</i>	
(1873) about 9,500†	(all counties) 10,000	3,072
<i>Norfolk</i>		
Walsingham 1,830	588	1,500
Swaffham 3,452	3,518	2,800
East Dereham 1,800	1,550	—
Norwich 5,050	North Walsham 2,039	930
Acle 550	—	—
Old Buckenham 1,500	Diss 2,000	2,000
<i>Lincolnshire League</i> 4,000	<i>Lincolnshire League</i> —	<i>Lincolnshire League</i> —
<i>Suffolk</i>		
Exning 5,529	3,233	Suffolk 2,800
<i>Lincolnshire League</i> (1873) nearly 2,000	<i>Lincolnshire League</i> —	<i>Lincolnshire League</i> —
<i>Essex</i>		
North Essex 3,500	3,339	1,500
South Essex 1,700	1,100	600
<i>Northants.</i>		
Market Harborough (Leics.) 2,402	1,541	Northampton 500
Wolverton (Bucks.) 2,050	1,900	Bucks. —

* Unless otherwise stated, figures for the National Agricultural Labourers' Union districts (printed in roman) come from the *Lab. U. Chron.* accounts of annual conferences (held in the summer), and those for the Federal Union's constituent members (printed in italic) from the annual returns of the Registrar of Friendly Societies. The latter are usually year-end figures. The 1874 membership figures for the Swaffham district and for the Lincolnshire League in Norfolk are taken from L. Marion Springall, *Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages*, 1936, p. 86. I am indebted to Mrs P. L. R. Horn for the membership of the Banbury district in December 1874, and for that claimed by the Peterborough District Union in 1877. The Peterborough district also had members in a number of neighbouring counties; and the Lincolnshire League operated not only in Lincolnshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk, but also, to some extent, in the East Riding of Yorks., Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Kent, and Wiltshire. Similarly, the West of England Union extended out of Herefordshire into Worcestershire and Wiltshire. I would welcome further information.

† An estimate based on a total League membership of 18,000–20,000 in September 1873 (Rex C. Russell, *The 'Revolt of the Field' in Lincs.* (n.pl., 1956), p. 46); on a statement that the League and the West of England Union would between them total 20,000 (*The Beehive*, 16 Aug. 1873, p. 10); on a West of England membership of over 3,500 in Herefordshire (*ibid.*, 2 Aug., p. 4); and on estimates of the League's membership in Suffolk (*ibid.*, 23 Aug., p. 4) and Norfolk.

TABLE I—continued

1874		1875		1879	
<i>Northants</i> —continued.					
<i>Peterborough District Union</i>	4,020		—	1877	2,000
<i>Hunts.</i>					
Brampton	1,300		800		—
<i>Cambs.</i>					
Wisbech	1,589		606 'men'		—
Sawston	3,000		1,200		1,500
<i>Beds.</i>					
Bedford	1,747		1,014		—
<i>Herts.</i>					
South Beds. and Herts.	1,150		893 (+ 50 since balance sheet)		—
<i>Bucks.</i>					
Wolverton	see above	Wolverton	see above		—
Aylesbury	2,577		1,650		—
<i>Middlesex</i>					
<i>Kent</i>					
West Kent	1,500		1,113		475
<i>Kent Agricultural and General Labourers' Union</i>	9,500		11,000		15,500
<i>Sussex</i>					
(<i>Kent Agricultural and General</i>)	inc. above	(<i>Kent Agricultural and General</i>)	inc. above	(<i>Kent and [East] Sussex</i>)	inc. above
<i>Surrey</i>					
Reigate	1,535		1,113	Surrey and Sussex	500
<i>West Surrey Union</i>	179		—		—
<i>Berks.</i>					
Reading	2,000	fairly quiescent	—		—
Wantage (West Berks.)	2,750	Hungerford	2,224	West Berks.	650
<i>Hants.</i>					
Andover	see below	Salisbury	see below	Salisbury	see below
North and South Hants.	1,400	Alton	1,500		800
		Isle of Wight	670		—
<i>Wilts.</i>					
Andover (Hants.)	2,020	Salisbury	3,000		1,000
<i>Dorset</i>					
Dorset	2,300		c. 2,075		1,100
<i>Somerset</i>					
Yeovil	c. 800	quiescent			—

TABLE I—*continued*

1874	1875	1879
<i>Devon*</i> } <i>Cornwall</i> }		
<i>Salop.</i> : very slight unionism		
<i>Herefordshire</i>		
Hereford 4,341	1,536	—
<i>West of England Union</i>		
(1873) 3,500†	—	—
<i>Worcestershire</i>		
Worcestershire 1,626	1,015	220
<i>Gloucestershire</i>		
Cirencester 2,800	2,300	2,300
<i>Gloucestershire Agricultural Association</i> not available	—	—
<i>Oxon.</i>		
Banbury (December) 2,599	2,300	1,000
Oxford 3,000	3,515	—
<i>Warws.</i>		
Warwickshire 5,090	4,467	1,300
<i>Staffs.</i>		
Burton-on-Trent 1,650	1,000	—
<i>Derbyshire</i> very slight unionism	—	—
<i>Notts.</i>	—	—
<i>Leics.</i>		
Market Harborough see above	see above	Northampton see above
<i>Rutland</i>	—	—
There was very slight unionism in Northumberland: a local union arose in 1872, was affiliated to the National Union in 1873-4, and thereafter faded away; it is unlikely to have numbered more than 250. The Lincolnshire League made a number of forays into agricultural Yorkshire, and also had an appreciable membership in the industrial north-east. There was no significant unionism in other northern counties.		
<i>Total:</i> Nov. 1873 Federal Union Over 49,000 claimed 1874 NALU 34 districts 79,257 members (out of 37 districts and 86,214 claimed at the annual conference)		

* The National Union was said to have stopped at Exeter.—*P.P.*, 1893-4, xxv, under Crediton.

† I disbelieve the 30,000 membership attributed to the West of England Union before the advent of the National Union. A loss of its members to the National must have contributed to the doubling of the numbers of the latter's Herefordshire district in the year 1873-4.

TABLE I—*continued*

<i>Total:—continued.</i>			
1875	NALU	32 districts	57,135 members (out of 38 districts and 58,652 claimed at the annual conference)
1879	NALU	24 districts	24,275 members (out of 23,145 (sic) claimed at the annual conference. Beds., Bucks., Oxford, and Spalding were breaking away, and their membership figures were therefore not available)

distinction should not, of course, be exaggerated—the Northumberland labourers did hold meetings and mounted tangible (though minor) movements. But the pattern of settlement does seem to have enhanced the influence of the press (probably at the expense of the pub), for “most of the homesteads being far from villages or towns farm labourers have little intercourse with the world; a reading room . . . is seldom within their reach, a provincial newspaper . . . is the only resource for the Sunday. . .”¹ Accordingly the labourers’ movement in Berwickshire and northern Northumberland revolved almost entirely around the correspondence columns of newspapers. And, though meetings assumed a greater importance elsewhere in Northumberland (especially after the advent of delegates from the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union), newspaper correspondence and advertisements continued on a scale unusual in the south. This necessarily affected the tone of discussion and diminished the role of formal organization.

The pattern of regional variations in wages also explains less than one would have anticipated. It is true that, speaking very broadly, wages were higher in the north and east than in the south and west; and agricultural unionism does not seem really to have flourished in either very high wage areas (like the Borders) or extremely low ones (like west Somerset). Contemporaries were well aware of these differences and attached great significance to them. Thus the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* ascribed the lack of progress of the local labourers’ movement to the fact that “undoubtedly . . . agricultural labour is better paid in Northumberland than any other part of England, so that whatever grievances really exist, they are not so urgent and galling as the yoke which the south country farm workers have risen against so resolutely.” And during the course of 1874 the *Hexham Courant* became increasingly exasperated at the course of events down south, concluding in October that the farming there must be incompetent, and the labourers’ leaders fools for not more resolutely encouraging migration. Moreover

¹ *P.P.*, 1868–9, XIII, p. 214.

southern farmers were surprisingly ready to accept these strictures: C. S. Read's statement that same month, that "the highly paid Scotch hind is a cheaper and better man than the Norfolk labourers," was both typical and widely quoted.¹

I would not deny that there was something in it. But the contrasts could be overdrawn. A newspaper debate put wages in the north Northumberland-Berwickshire area at between £38 13s. (or, on the most unfavourable assumption, £33 15s.) and £49 15s. a year in 1872, a poor law report for Berwickshire at £36-£38 p.a. Admittedly wages were a little higher around Hexham. But such sums were not inconceivable even in Dorset, where one of the first farmers to be affected by trades unionism submitted wage schedules for ordinary men for 1870 of from £39 19s. 9d. to £43 10s. 7d. And, in richer East Anglia, Clifford had no difficulty in unearthing ordinary labourers (including many of the Exning strikers) who earned sums of the order of £45-£50 p.a. all in.² The greater welfare of the north must have been ascribable as much to a different pattern of life (and to the more extensive employment of women) as simply to higher wages.³

But, if the incidence of unionism cannot be explained simply by the absolute level of wages in 1872, one might nevertheless hope that it would reflect differential trends in the past. Such trends are, of course, notoriously difficult to establish.⁴ But, as far as they can be ascertained, they do not seem to fall into any very clear pattern or to have been particularly influential (except, no doubt, at a highly local level).⁵ Indeed, even increasing prosperity might

¹ *Newcastle Chronicle*, 22 Feb. 1873, p. 4; *Hexham Courant*, 3 Oct. 1874, p. 3; *Bury and Suffolk Standard*, 20 Oct. 1874, p. 5.

² *Berwick Journal*, 24 Jan. and 7 Feb. 1873; *Berwickshire News*, 25 March 1873; *Dors. Exp.*, 28 May 1872; F. Clifford, *The Agricultural Lock-out of 1874*, Edinburgh, 1875, pp. 26, 30, 97-8, 325, 330, etc. The Exning strike was for an increase in the minimum wage rate from 13s. to 14s. a week.

³ In south-eastern Scotland about as many women were employed as men on root-growing farms.—*P.P.*, 1870, XIII, p. 219. For an illustration of the different patterns of expenditure, see e.g. *P.P.*, 1867-8, XVII, p. 220.

⁴ One can produce very rough figures for average weekly wage rates. But to establish the labourer's real financial position, one also needs to know his regularity of employment; what perquisites he enjoyed over and above his cash wage; his opportunities for piece and harvest work; and the net income of other members of his family. Such factors cannot readily be quantified. Nor are fluctuations in basic weekly rates a very good guide to them, since the various factors assumed different importance at different times and in different parts of the country.

⁵ I base this statement on the figures for average weekly wage rates county by county given in Lord Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present* (6th edn, ed. G. E. Fussell and O. R. MacGregor, 1961), which I have supplemented on occasion by reference to other material and translated into percentages.

bring grievances in its train. This was notably the case in south-eastern Scotland and Northumberland, where the commendable expansion of agriculture since the 1840's had involved increasing reliance on 'bondagers' (or female workers hired indirectly through the male worker and maintained by him). This system led to considerable opposition in 1866; and though the labourers allowed themselves to be bought off at the time, the subject soon came forward again and occupied the principal place in most recitals of their grievances.¹

Finally we reach the labourers' demands for land. The agricultural trades unionism of the 1870's was undoubtedly associated with a form of land hunger, yet it was far rarer in counties where allotments were scarce than in those where they were relatively numerous: it was not to be found at all in the majority of counties with more than fifty persons per allotment.² Presumably the absence of allotments here reflected an absence of demand, and thus a rather different structure of society.

But if housing and wages are only doubtful guides to the incidence of unionism, and the prevalence of allotments gives a rather paradoxical answer, we must look for other potential causes of agricultural unrest. The discovery of these, and of prophylactics against discontent, occupied much of the time of agricultural societies for most of the nineteenth century. So there is no shortage of items to choose from. I shall here concentrate on four: the system of hiring fairs; the proportion of indoor farm servants; the extent of arable farming; and the size of farms.

"If the masters and servants in lock-out districts could agree to hold periodic hirings as we in the border counties do," remarked the *Hexham Courant*,³ "wages would adjust themselves without any of the evils which must attend lock-outs or strikes." This point of view was commonly expressed in the north, and occasionally elsewhere. And, though Joseph Arch abominated the hiring system, he mentioned it as one of the principal reasons for his lack of appeal in Northumberland.⁴ Certainly the system of numerous and well-publicized hiring fairs offered an excellent opportunity for testing the state of the market, one of the main functions that intellectual

¹ See 'The Scottish Farm Labourer', *Cornhill Magazine*, x, 1864, esp. pp. 620-1; the letter of 'An Old Ploughman out of Harness', *Berwickshire News*, 13 Feb. 1872; *P.P.*, 1870, XIII, pp. 218, 225.

² These were (in increasing order of rural population to allotments of less than one acre): the East and West Ridings, Herefordshire, Northumberland, Cornwall, Sussex, Salop., Monmouthshire, Cheshire, Lancs., Durham, Cumberland, and Westmorland.—*P.P.*, 1873, LXXVI, pt 2, pp. 26 ff.; *P.P.*, 1896, LXVII, p. 584. Cottage gardens, smallholdings, etc. are excluded, and so the result can only be of very general indicative value.

³ 6 June 1874, p. 5.

⁴ *P.P.*, 1882, XIV, questions 60230-3, 60546.

sympathizers ascribed to unionism in the south. Thus the Berwick fair of March 1873 assumed "the nature of a 'feeler' of the intentions of both masters and servants," the actual conclusion of engagements being postponed to other local hiring markets. Formal combinations (like the Berwickshire Farm Servants Friendly Society in November 1872) might occasionally resolve all to demand the same minimum terms for wages and conditions;¹ but this was difficult to implement in practice and never gave rise to collective bargaining as such (though agitation centring around hiring fairs might well force concessions on particular items²). Farther south the Northumberland Union offered guidance only as to hours and as to the undesirability of the bondager system: "They could not enforce a uniform rate of wages. As far as they were concerned each man must be left to make his own terms when they took to the streets for it and again offered themselves for sale." And though, after joining the National Union later in 1873, men began to express opposition to the fairs, they had no real alternative to offer. Indeed, when the farmers sought to change the date of a Newcastle hiring fair in their own interests, the men reacted not by abandoning the system but by staging a fair of their own on the old date.³

The working of the system can be illustrated from a cycle of fairs in and around southern Northumberland. In the spring of 1873 wages were rising, so at Hexham the men asked for an advance of about 10 per cent and were reluctant to find bondagers. This made hiring slow, but "towards the close nearly all were hired at advanced rates." Later, however, the farmers' reluctance grew, and in June, at Brampton, "although masters were prepared for an advance they were astonished at the terms asked. Engagements were, therefore, very slow indeed at first . . . , and servants finding the wages required too much, lowered their pretensions, and then hirings were more readily effected. Yet there were some who could not find new situations. Either they rated their services too high or there was perhaps a paucity of masters" some of whom had resolved to cut back on their labour force. But in November, at Hexham, several farmers offered too little and so failed to secure servants. By now some were grumbling openly at the high wages, and may even have declined to pay for the traditional harvest festivals. Hiring was sticky throughout 1874, the men still hoping for an advance but often

¹ *Berwick Journal*, 7 March 1873; *Berwickshire News*, 26 Nov. 1872.

² Thus it was said twenty years later of Wales where the same system prevailed that "Some combinations have been attempted, but the most successful have had only a short-lived career, and their objects have been more or less of a temporary character. . . a slight concession has, as a rule, been followed by the collapse of the movement."—*P.P.*, 1893-4, xxxvi, p. 29.

³ *Hexham Courant*, 22 Feb. 1873, p. 5; *Lab. U. Chron.*, 11 April 1874, p. 5.

not getting it, and sometimes being left on the market. Wage trends varied from fair to fair, and by 1875 the balance had shifted back slightly towards the farmers. At Hexham only good men escaped "a slight reduction;" more generally wages were said to be little changed except at Newcastle, "where, towards evening, some men had to submit to a reduction, but there was a wonderful difference in tone and demeanour; that devil-may-care sort of swagger, so disagreeably conspicuous twelve months ago, had nearly disappeared... [several miners were returning to agriculture.]... How wonderfully easy supply and demand regulate themselves."¹ In this very competitive atmosphere, there was not much place for trades unions, especially as the engagements thus reached were enforceable at law.

The only southern county where such a system might have worked was Dorset, for only there was it common to hire ordinary labourers (as distinct from carters and other skilled men) by the year. But, for good and bad reasons, hiring fairs were very much under a cloud. As a result fairs had been mildly discouraged for at least a decade before 1872, the Dorchester Farmers' Club having made repeated half-hearted attempts to boycott them, to deal privately with the men, or to find an alternative through registration and advertisements. Again the press gave the fairs very little publicity, whereas it was an essential feature of the northern system that fairs should be numerous and that everybody should know the current rates and trends at them. There was, too, a distinct casualness and uncertainty as to the obligations created by the yearly bond. These were not (as is sometimes suggested) negligible. But a labourer's contract could be terminated fairly summarily for 'misconduct', and, perhaps surprisingly, the magistrates were not really prepared to enforce contracts against ordinary labourers who had gone on strike, though they would against carters. The Dorset system of yearly engagements was therefore no guarantee against trades unionism.

Where hiring fairs really flourished, a high proportion of the farm workers were unmarried, and boarded in the farmhouses. And this certainly militated against the development of formal trades unions. For a strike must have been difficult to organize when one was actually living in a farmer's house; and close social relations were universally believed to make for an identification of the farmer's and labourers' interests. Moreover, where farms were small, there was a strong possibility that the in-servants would be the younger sons of farmers, saving to set themselves up in a farm rather than looking upon themselves as a class apart from their employers. And, in any case, the system delayed marriage, and so made it easier for the labourers

¹ *Hexham Courant*, 5 April, 7 June, 4 Oct., 15 Nov., 6 Dec., 1873, 8 and 15 May 1875, and *passim*.

to save money to tide themselves over the first really difficult period in the adult farm labourer's life. It is, therefore, interesting to note that the practice of farm servants living in declined in the south of England between 1851 and 1871, but increased in the north.

TABLE II*
RATIO OF 'INDOOR' TO 'OUTDOOR' FARM SERVANTS

County	1851	1861	1871
Lincs.	1 : 3.6	1 : 4.2	1 : 4.3
Norfolk	1 : 19.9	1 : 35.4	1 : 103.3
Suffolk	1 : 15.1	1 : 43.2	1 : 194.5
Essex	1 : 30.0	1 : 78.7	1 : 440.0
Northants.	1 : 15.1	1 : 23.3	1 : 30.7
Hunts.	1 : 16.8	1 : 42.0	1 : 41.5
Cambs.	1 : 22.4	1 : 48.6	1 : 31.9
Beds.	1 : 29.9	1 : 61.3	1 : 39.8
Herts.	1 : 11.4	1 : 19.4	1 : 22.5
Bucks.	1 : 13.8	1 : 15.5	1 : 22.6
Middlesex	1 : 16.6	1 : 27.3	1 : 31.5
Kent	1 : 8.2	1 : 11.4	1 : 12.1
Sussex	1 : 11.5	1 : 21.6	1 : 22.1
Surrey	1 : 11.5	1 : 15.8	1 : 20.9
Berks.	1 : 10.0	1 : 11.4	1 : 20.1
Hants.	1 : 13.1	1 : 17.3	1 : 23.8
Wilts.	1 : 31.4	1 : 41.9	1 : 60.0
Dorset	1 : 31.3	1 : 45.5	1 : 79.0
Somerset	1 : 8.8	1 : 12.7	1 : 12.5
Devon	1 : 2.2	1 : 2.3	1 : 3.2
Cornwall	1 : 2.2	1 : 3.1	1 : 2.8
Salop.	1 : 2.5	1 : 2.4	1 : 2.4
Herefordshire	1 : 4.3	1 : 4.9	1 : 3.7
Worcestershire	1 : 8.2	1 : 7.9	1 : 9.8
Gloucestershire	1 : 10.9	1 : 17.5	1 : 14.8
Oxon.	1 : 16.0	1 : 22.3	1 : 37.6
Warws.	1 : 5.9	1 : 7.1	1 : 8.8
Staffs.	1 : 3.2	1 : 4.0	1 : 3.1
Derbyshire	1 : 2.3	1 : 2.5	1 : 1.8
Notts.	1 : 3.1	1 : 3.3	1 : 3.3
Leics.	1 : 4.0	1 : 6.5	1 : 5.5
Rutland	1 : 6.0	1 : 9.0	1 : 11.5

* Derived from *P.P.*, 1852-3, LXXXVIII, pts 1 & 2; *P.P.*, 1863, LIII, pt 1; *P.P.*, 1873, LXXI, pt 1.

TABLE II—*continued*

<i>County</i>	1851	1861	1871
Northumberland	1 : 5.8	1 : 6.2	1 : 4.9
Durham	1 : 2.7	1 : 3.2	1 : 2.0
Yorks. North Riding	1 : 1.7	1 : 1.7	1 : 1.3
East Riding	1 : 1.5	1 : 1.5	1 : 1.4
West Riding	1 : 1.7	1 : 3.3	1 : 2.5
Cumberland	1 : 1.4	1 : 1.3	1 : 0.9
Westmorland	1 : 1.2	1 : 1.2	1 : 0.7
Lancs.	1 : 3.1	1 : 3.5	1 : 2.4
Cheshire	1 : 2.0	1 : 2.6	1 : 2.9
Monmouthshire			1 : 2.3
South Wales (incl. Radnorshire)			1 : 1.0
North Wales			1 : 0.9

While it would be too much to hope for a perfect correlation between trades unionism and the absence of indoor servants, there is, in fact, a surprisingly close one: trades unionism was present in all counties with a ratio of over 30 out-door to 1 indoor servant in 1871, and virtually absent where the ratio was less than 3 to 1.

Indoor servants were, of course, less necessary to arable than to pastoral farming. Partly for this reason, and partly because it was more labour intensive, arable farming was the more prone to unionism. The Wiltshire writer, Richard Jefferies, remarked that it was "the corn villagers [who], thinking that the farmer was absolutely dependent upon them, led the van for the agitation for high wages:" and again "it is in arable districts that agitation takes its extreme form. The very number of the population gives any movement a vigour and emphasis that is wanting where there may be as much discontent but fewer exhibit it."¹ Thus we find that trades unionism was strong in all but two of the counties with more than 40 per cent arable in 1873-4,² and virtually absent in all with less than 20 per cent.³

Lastly, there is quite good evidence that unionism, and still more industrial action, were features principally of large farms. Thus the wage demand that started the dispute around Woodbridge, Suffolk, in March 1874 was

¹ *Hodge and his Masters*, 1890 edn, pp. 397-8.

² That is in Beds., Berks., Cambs., Essex, Hunts., Lincs., Norfolk, Oxon., and Suffolk; it was relatively weak in Herts. (44 per cent) and very weak in the East Riding (42 per cent).—*P.P.*, 1874, LXIX, pp. 627 ff.

³ That is in Cheshire, Cumberland, Derbyshire, Lancs., and Westmorland. It was very weak in Somerset (18 per cent) and Monmouthshire (17-18 per cent). The English average was 31.4 per cent.

made to "twelve large farmers . . . employing altogether about 170 men." Also, where the farmers retaliated, the lead was taken by the large men; they could be more easily organized, and they could better afford to take a firm stand. In East Anglia the farmers formed defence associations, raising money by a levy on acreage; "the backbone . . . consisted of men who farm their own land, along with land belonging to others—owning, say, from 100 to 1,000 acres." And in Lincolnshire the first meeting to establish a comparable Farmers' Association was attended by fifty-seven men, farming over 38,000 acres.¹ It is, therefore, not surprising to find agricultural trades unionism present where a relatively high proportion of farmers employed more than ten men each, and usually absent where comparatively few did so.

TABLE III*
PERCENTAGE OF FARMERS, BY COUNTIES, EMPLOYING 10 OR MORE MEN IN 1861 AND 1871
(SAMPLES ONLY)

1861		
More than 20%	Bucks.	32·6%
	Wilts.	30·9%
	Norfolk	25·5%
	Cambs.	25·2%
	Sussex	23·1%
10%–20%	Lincs.	13·3%
Less than 10%	Salop.	5·3%
	Cheshire	2·1%
	Yorks., N.R.	1·8%
	Cumberland	0·9%
Average 17·9%		

1871		
More than 20%	Essex	29·5%
	Berks.	28·7%
	Kent	21·9%
	Hants. }	
	Norfolk	20·2%
10%–20%	Suffolk	18·8%
	Surrey	18·1%
	Sussex	17·6%
	Lincs.	12·2%
	Northumberland	10·9%
Less than 10%	Rutland	9·1%
	Notts.	5·5%
	Leics.	5·0%
	Cumberland	1·8%
	Durham }	
	Derbyshire	1·3%
	Westmorland	1·0%
Average 16·1%		

* Derived from *P.P.*, 1873, LXXI, pp. 123 ff.; *P.P.*, 1863, LIII, pt 1, pp. 139 ff.

So far I have concentrated on fairly clear-cut differences between regions. But it is arguable that the really important differences were more local, for,

¹ Clifford, *op. cit.*, pp. 90, 10, 114, 167–8; Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

even in areas where the unions were strong, they generally constituted a minority movement, an exception to the normal pattern of relations.¹ The same was true of the farmers' defence associations that organized the lock-outs; Clifford doubts whether these latter can have contained more than 650 of Suffolk's 4,654 farmers. Therefore, there are likely to have been special factors behind the decision to join a trades union (or defence association); and, as we shall see later, whatever the union's formal constitution, the decisions that mattered were usually taken at a fairly low level. Local contrasts, therefore, are to be expected, on the pattern of those that impressed Clifford near Bury St Edmunds, where the union clearly "had not the same general hold as in the Newmarket district. It was curious, also, to find strong Union developments in one village, and none, or next to none, in the next."²

These contrasts are particularly important in explaining the origins of unionism in an area, for later there was naturally an attempt to even things out by evangelizing in the more backward districts. I shall seek to illustrate this by discussing the developments in Herefordshire and Dorset. The first stirrings in Herefordshire came in March 1871, with a well-organized and reported meeting in Leintwardine. The resultant movement was led by a local schoolmaster, Strange, and enjoyed the support of the rector. It was motivated largely by the peculiar conditions of the county, where (untypically) farmers and landlords were at loggerheads. Hence, Strange maintained in his opening speech, that "this is just the right time [to agitate], for are not our brethren the farmers trying to get reform? We say yes, and we will try to help them to get it, because what they are trying for, and what we are trying for, is part and parcel of the same burden—only they forgot our part of it." In addition to pressing the labourers' particular interests, he envisaged a joint farmer-labourer approach to the landlords for lower rents, and co-operation with the local Chamber of Agriculture on local taxation.³

For a year the agitation remained local to Leintwardine; but the following March a determined attempt was made to extend it (as had always been in-

¹ Norfolk, 18.2 thousand union members, 28.0 thousand male agricultural labourers aged 15-54; Warws., 5.1, 9.9; Herefordshire (in 1873), c. 5.5, 14.0; Lincs., c. 12.6, 33.0; Kent and East Sussex, 9.5 (subsequently reaching 15.5), c. 41.5; Suffolk, 7.5+, 26.4; Essex, 5.2+, 30.6; Dorset, 2.3, 11.1. Calculations for other areas are complicated by the overlap between trades union and census boundaries. Of course, not all union members were male agricultural labourers.

² Clifford, *op. cit.*, pp. 69, 169.

³ *Heref. T.*, 18 March 1871, p. 3; Joseph Arch, *The Story of his Life Told by Himself*, 1898, p. 110.

tended), and "to form a combination of the whole of the agricultural labourers of the West of England, if not, indeed, of the whole country." To that end, a meeting was called in Staunton, Glos., a district held to be suitable since the many O'Connor allotments there made the labourers more independent of the farmers. The Staunton meeting was followed by several others, spaced either strategically throughout the area or clustered near Colwall and around the house of an ardent sympathizer near Ross.

Whatever may have been their original intentions, these meetings proved obnoxious to, and were sometimes physically interrupted by, farmers. Accordingly, in the context of Herefordshire rivalries, landlords proceeded to express sympathy with the labourers, which led to further newspaper controversy of the "I pay more generously than you" variety. On the whole, landlord sympathy remained fairly platonic, definitely stopping short of rent reductions in aid of wages. But one self-styled landlord, W. G. Ward of Perristone, Ross, did enter the labourers' movement with great vigour (despite his own unremarkable record as an employer), and was soon pressing for a strike and challenging the more pacific Strange for the labourers' leadership. At this point, alas, the *Hereford Times* stopped reporting the agitation, finding its meetings repetitive and abusive.¹ But we know that Ward split the local movement, affiliating part of it to the National Union. Strange retained control of the rest, under the title of the West of England Labourers' Union, and accepted only loose mergers, first with the Lincolnshire League, and then with the Federal Union.

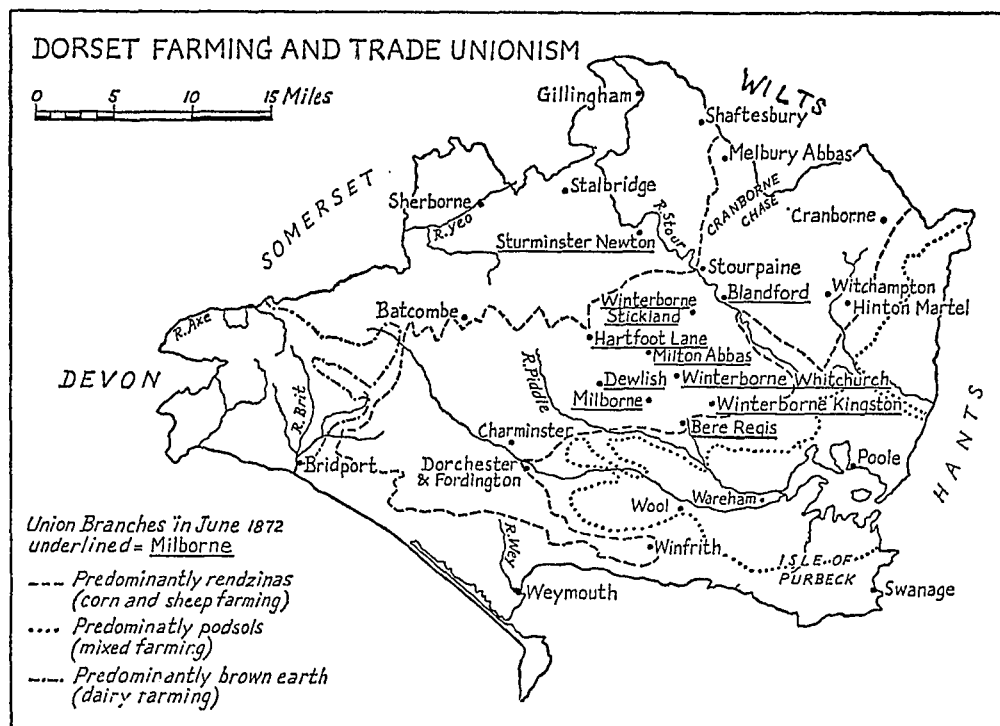
In the late 1860's Dorset could be divided, agriculturally, into four. In the north were small grass farms, using little hired labour. Wages were low and there was winter unemployment. The central chalk hills were occupied by large farms, paying (for Dorset) comparatively well. But, as the labourers often lived some distance from their work, yearly hirings and tied cottages were common (which may explain the rapid recourse to evictions in labour disputes). To the south lay the Heath, overpopulated, with bad housing, seasonal employment, and low wages. Finally, in the Isle of Purbeck, agriculture was extensively supplemented by quarrying. Alternatively, Dorset could be divided on the pattern of its villages: most of the county consisted of compact main-street villages, but especially in the west these gave place to more hamlets whose isolation must have been intensified by the comparative absence of railways in the west.²

It was observed at the time that the west of the county was not much

¹ *Heref. T.*, 9 March 1872, p. 10; 25 May, p. 5; and *passim*.

² *P.P.*, 1868-9, XIII, pp. 3-6, 235-70; Barbara Kerr, 'The Dorset Agricultural Labourer, 1750-1850', *Proc. Dorset Nat. Hist. and Archaeolog. Soc.*, LXXXIV, 1962, esp. pp. 159, 174.

affected by trades unionism.¹ Moreover, of the ten branches in operation by June 1872, nine were on the central chalk hills. By September membership had approximately quadrupled (to over 2,000) and the number of branches had risen to 132. There had been particular expansion along the Piddle, up the chain of villages from Blandford to Melbury Abbas, and into the Heath District around Wool and Winfrith. But the two centres of unionism were still said to be Milborne and Stickland; and this concentration on



Derived from Barbara Kerr, 'The Dorset Agricultural Labourer, 1750-1850', *Proc. Dorset Nat. Hist. and Archaeolog. Soc.*, LXXXIV, 1962, p. 159.

the centre of the county is the more remarkable in that Stalbridge, in the north, was the first district to be disturbed. Its Congregationalist minister sponsored migration, but was soon squeezed out, and does not seem to have been replaced by any very powerful union presence. By September 1872 the union had reached its approximate ceiling. Of course it continually sought to expand its area of activity, successfully in the villages to the south-east of Cranborne Chase, less so elsewhere. But its gains were counterbalanced by numerous losses, the number of branches falling to sixty by May 1874. The

¹ *Dors. Exp.*, 29 Oct. 1872, p. 2.

union's strength continued to be chiefly derived from the central and eastern chalk lands.¹

Sometimes, though rarely, one can descend to village level. Many attempts draw blank: I have failed to find any particular correlation between the incidence of trades unionism in 1872 and the quantity of allotments in the Blandford district, or the quality of housing in the Cerne district. Among the villages whose housing the 1867 Commissioner singled out as deplorable, trades unionism soon established itself in Bere Regis, Winfrith, and Fordington, but not in Charminster, Cranborne, and Batcombe. However, there does seem to be some correlation between the incidence of unionism and that of nonconformist places of worship. So it is not surprising that the movement had "found it desirable to get Christian men and teetotallers as officers," or that the sect most ready to loan chapels for meetings was the Primitive Methodist.²

The real difficulty in searching at this level for the causes of trades unionism is that there are too many possible ones. Branches were established in low-wage villages (like Winfrith and Stourpaine), in declining ones (like Bere Regis), but also in 'favoured' ones like Milborne and Whitchurch. Indeed, it was in the latter two that trades unionism started in Dorset; and, on this occasion, one can see why. Although conditions were relatively good, there were a number of sources of irritation. As in most closed villages, there was a shortage of housing. Though allotments were available (at Milborne at a pepper-corn rental), there were grumbles at their small size; and the farmers had commuted for cash some of the traditional perquisites (especially drink). More importantly, the farmers supported reading-rooms in both parishes under "the sole management of the working men:" the average daily attendance in 1867 had reached the creditable figures of nineteen and twenty-five (out of populations of 647 and 554), though not all would have been agricultural labourers. Milborne also had a working men's club, and Whitchurch a co-operative store. Such facilities had clearly taught the labourers self-reliance; and the initial strike was enough of a joint venture to persuade the *Dorset Express* that the men lacked a leader. It was, moreover, set off by newspaper reports of events in other parts of the country; and, when it failed, a letter to the *Beehive* attracted the outside assistance that made possible a second and more successful attempt.³

Prior to 1872, there had only been two other *registered* co-operatives in

¹ *Dors. Exp.*, esp. 25 June, 30 July, 17 Sept. 1872; *Lab. U. Chron.*, 16 May 1874, and *passim*.

² *P.P.*, 1868-9, XIII, pp. 6, 261, 264; *Post Office Directory of Dorset, Wilts., and Hants.*, 1867 edn; *Lab. U. Chron.*, 29 Nov. 1873, p. 6.

³ *P.P.*, 1868-9, XIII, pp. 247, 259, 264; *Dors. Exp.*, 7 and 28 May, 23 July 1872.

the rural parts of Dorset, at Milton Abbas and Winterborne Stickland. Another such store (albeit an ephemeral one) was registered at Milborne in June 1872. As we have seen, all these villages were among the earliest union strongholds, and Milborne and Stickland were described as unionism's two centres. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that by June 1875 there was a union store open to any member in the county; some £80 worth of goods are said to have been dispatched in the previous three months (at prices 15 per cent below those previously ruling for the labourer). There were similar developments in other areas. Thus, in Herefordshire, the West of England Union sought to establish "stores in connection with the branches;" and, in a county where there had previously been only one registered co-operative, 1873 saw the registration of a further five. In 1874-5 the Kent Agricultural and General also ran a store, which failed partly through organizational difficulties and partly because the wholesalers backed the established shops in a temporary price-cutting campaign.¹

I have concentrated on Herefordshire and Dorset, but the same approach can, of course, be applied elsewhere. Mr Peacock has done this for Cambridgeshire (in an as yet unpublished paper), showing, for instance, how trades unionism grew naturally in Cottenham out of a rumpus about the local charities, but gained no foothold in nearby Histon (a traditionally quiet village, and one without charities). It was trouble over charities, again, that induced the villagers of Leverton, Lincs., to turn to a local republican agitator, William Banks, and thus enabled his Amalgamated Labour League to get off the ground. Similarly in Norfolk Flaxman's short-lived Eastern Counties Union can be traced directly to disputes over enclosures. And so on.²

Moreover, if the incidence of trades unionism was largely determined by local factors, so was its permanence. In one Wiltshire village there remained only four union members in November 1873. The remainder had been put off by the return of the families the union had dispatched to the north. In another, the inhabitants had treated the union simply as another benefit club. Instead of sending their subscriptions direct to Leamington, as their mentor had intended, they split up among themselves all their accumulated assets of £6 12s. 1d.³

Any attempt to decide whether they were the losers leads necessarily to an

¹ Annual Returns of the Registrar of Friendly Societies; *Lab. U. Chron.*, 12 June 1875, p. 4; *Heref. T.*, 8 Feb. 1873, p. 8; *P.P.*, 1882, xiv, questions 61363-6.

² *The Labourer*, 15 Jan. 1876, p. 1; information from Mr F. Cossey; Springall, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-1.

³ *Lab. U. Chron.*, 29 Nov. 1873, p. 6.

examination of the union's organization. In theory there were two models, centralized and decentralized. The National Union involved a hierarchy—at about village level, *branches* (preferably with 150 members, but in fact founded for as few as four); at about county level, *districts* (preferably with at least 1,500 members); and, in the centre, an office at *Leamington*. Three-quarters of the subscriptions were to be forwarded to Leamington, and one-quarter retained by the district to meet its own administrative costs. For various reasons a number of regional unions disliked this system and refused to join the National. Instead they formed a Federal Union, in practice a confederation of virtually sovereign members which served principally to conduct relations with, and raise money from, the outside world. Moreover, at least the largest of these constituent unions, the Lincolnshire League, had a very loose structure; in late 1874 it had only just started to raise its financial centre of gravity from village to district level.¹

Both the National and the Federal Unions were split by real or alleged financial scandals, that indicated at least a considerable laxity in accounting. Moreover, we are often faced with flat contradictions about such matters as amounts of money paid in² or numbers of men on strike;³ and, though we may guess which story to prefer, it is impossible to be certain. We must, therefore, regard claims as to union finances and organization with a fair degree of scepticism. But, subject to this major proviso, I shall attempt to discuss the organization of the National Union, and to make occasional comparisons with other (and less well documented) unions.

The National's system of centralization had two possible justifications: it might assist public relations with, and the raising of funds from, the outside world; and it might make it possible for "the whole power of England ... [to] be thrown into any district that the necessities of the case shall require."⁴ Both justifications had some substance. For the world at large tended to regard all agricultural labourers' unions as part of the National. Accordingly the National was more successful than the Federal in securing outside contributions during the 1874 Eastern Counties lock-out.⁵ And centralization also facilitated a concentration of resources where they were most needed. The

¹ *Labour League Examiner*, 17 Oct. 1874, p. 1.

² See e.g. *Lab. U. Chron.*, 17 June 1875, p. 7 (under Dorset).

³ Thus the (radical) *Kent Messenger and Maidstone Telegraph* professed itself unable to locate the 900 men whom Simmons claimed as locked out.—11 Jan. and 1 Feb. 1879, p. 5.

⁴ W. G. Ward to the *Heref. T.*, 25 May 1872, p. 9.

⁵ The Federal collected £2,630 for rather under 2,000 locked out members, the National some £12,600 for rather over 3,000.—The Federal Union of Agricultural and General Labourers, *Report to the Trade Societies and General Public of the United Kingdom*, 1874, at end; Clifford, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-2; *Lab. U. Chron.*, 29 May 1875, p. 5.

first (purely local) strike in Dorset failed, and it was assistance from Warwickshire that enabled the movement to get off the ground. Another such rescue operation was conducted in north Essex in 1876; and the central secretary was encouraged, in his perambulations, to inspect local accounts and give helpful advice.¹ But, indubitably if unreasonably, the existence of such central control served to intensify the farmers' hostility to the movement; and even the Federal Union took the same line, declaring that "the tyranny of the National Union agents was far more intolerable than that of the farmers."²

The advantages of centralization, then, though real, had their limitations. Moreover the system was necessarily expensive. Each district was entitled to retain a quarter of its income to cover its administrative costs—and, in later years when unionism was declining, few districts were able to manage on their quarter.³ No special provision was made for branch expenses, but branches appear to have added an eighth to the basic subscription.⁴ Finally there was the central office in Leamington, and that did not run on air.

A very substantial proportion of the National Union's income, therefore, went on administration, and it may well compare unfavourably in this respect with, say, the geographically far more compact Kent and Sussex Union.⁵ Thus, out of its total income of £22,400 in 1873-4, the National Union spent about £9,300 on administration and a further £400 on legal expenses. Though special circumstances made the 1874-5 performance more creditable, the 1875 annual conference (which was, in any case, meeting in an atmosphere of disillusion) heard bitter criticisms of the cost of the central office and of the National delegates. Matters were not helped by Arch's statement that "For some time there had been a deficiency of about £150; they did not know where the wrong was." The upshot was the

¹ *Oxf. Chron.*, 27 May 1876, p. 8; 30 Oct. 1875, p. 6.

² See e.g. Clifford, *op. cit.*, pp. 59, 62, and the Federal Union's *Report, op. cit.*, p. 6.

³ At least according to the Oxford district secretary.—*Lab. U. Chron.*, 8 June 1878, p. 4.

⁴ This was the practice in the Oxford district.—*Minutes*, April-May 1873, G. D. H. Cole Collection, Nuffield College Library, Oxford; also of the Deanshanger branch of the Bucks. district.—*Lab. U. Chron.*, 1 Dec. 1877, p. 7. Many branches also maintained their own 'incidental funds'.

⁵ This relied on the immediate forwarding of the money collected at the fortnightly meetings of its 250 branches. In 1880 management (and conference) expenses accounted for £1,000-£1,200 out of a total central income of about £11,500; but there were also local contingency funds that had spent some £500-£600 paying off arrears of subscriptions.—*P.P.*, 1882, XIV, questions 59178-83, 61091-117, 61318-24. Admittedly the Kent Union had by now virtually converted itself into a benefit society, spending only some £1,500 p.a. on its trade section.

National Union's first major split, and, though this led to a tightening of financial procedures, it was now too late.¹

A *post mortem* investigation conducted after the conference by Samuel Morley and Mr Hughes found the central office reasonably competent, and laid particular blame on the management (and number) of the districts. Also "The scale of expenditure hitherto allowed appeared . . . higher than they could afford, and they noted that even this scale had been exceeded in the past year."² In my own view, the trouble was not so much palpable extravagance as a reluctance ever to count the cost. This reluctance comes out repeatedly in minor instances; and I would not, myself, be inclined to exempt the union's central institutions from this charge.

Despite this superstructure, the National Union, in its early years, showed an alarming inability to collect its subscriptions. Thus it claimed a membership of about 72,000 in 1873, 86,000 in 1874, and 59,000 in 1875. Paying 2d. a week *regularly*, 57,000 members should have brought in £24,700 p.a. Yet basic subscriptions amounted only to some £8,000 in 1872-3 (not, for many branches, a full year), £21,000 in 1873-4, and £23,000 (plus £5,600 special collections) in 1874-5. (These ratios are fairly close to those achieved by the Kent Agricultural and General in the years 1872-4, and by the Lincolnshire League in 1873.)³

Of the basic subscriptions Leamington only received about 40 per cent in 1872-3 and 1873-4, and just over 50 per cent (plus the £5,600 special collections) in 1874-5. This suggests that the union's real centre of gravity remained at a fairly low level. Symbolically, its various organs kept different financial years until the 1875 reforms. Moreover, it appears that the 1874 Exning and Alderton demands (that set off the Eastern Counties lock-out) were for improvements in both wages and hours simultaneously.⁴ This, for

¹ For the Union's annual accounts and conferences, see the *Lab. U. Chron.*, 7 June 1873; 13 June 1874; 29 May 1875.

² *Oxf. Chron.*, 30 Oct. 1875, p. 6.

³ Returns of the Registrar of Friendly Societies. But if the local funds of the Kent Agricultural and General amounted to anything substantial, this union would appear to better advantage.

⁴ The Alderton demand was for a rise of a shilling and for a 54-hour week as from 2 March (which amounts to a request that the customary longer summer hours should either not be worked or be paid at overtime rates). There had also been a strike the previous year in the same district for both higher wages and shorter hours. The Exning demand of September 1872 was explicitly for both higher wages and shorter hours (as, apparently, were the Essex ones of the same period). The combination was not explicit in that of the following March, and Clifford does not print that of February 1874. But the Newmarket meeting, held to consider the Exning strike, clearly felt that wages and hours had been linked, and resolved against concession on either.—Clifford, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-13, 31, 94 n., 159-61; *P.P.*, 1890, LXVIII, pp. 594-5.

some reason, was against the National Union's rules, and presumably cannot have had Leamington's prior approval. Yet the men struck on being ignored; the farmers retaliated on a wider scale, and the whole union was drawn into an unsuccessful confrontation with them.

Local initiatives were seldom so disastrous, but the pattern is not untypical. For printed forms for wage claims seem to have been issued in blank to the districts (to be filled up locally), and they could also be copied by hand at a lower level. Accordingly the Oxford district found it necessary to resolve in March 1873 that branches should consult the district secretary before making wage claims, and shortly thereafter that no branch should claim a rise in wages and a reduction of hours simultaneously.¹

I have attempted to reconstruct the workings of this district from its Minute Book, but have encountered difficulties since both Leamington and the district sent their subordinates circulars that have not survived. Considering that it never got from Leamington anything approaching the funds it sent there, Oxford was a surprisingly loyal district. It was broadly aligned behind Joseph Arch until late in 1878. It proved ready to defer some schemes in deference to the rest of the union, and it accepted a certain amount of central control over its personnel. But the minutes contain only a few references to problems that were referred to Leamington for guidance (and, even then, its advice was not always accepted). The centre does not seem generally to have been consulted (as the union constitution demanded) on such matters as the authorization of wage claims and strikes. And administrative decisions (on questions like entitlement to benefit) were primarily local. Thus in July 1873 the district executive committee rejected a claim for strike benefit on the part of five men from Watlington on the grounds that they had "violated Rule 10;" but the following September it reconsidered this decision after an appeal by the Watlington branch committee. Moreover, while Oxford was not unusual in having a district emigration fund, it did claim to lay particular stress on it, and occasionally supported it in preference to the union's central treasury.²

Moreover, if Leamington had trouble with its districts, these in turn had difficulty in controlling their branches. It seems that the Oxford district was generally consulted as to branch wage claims, but by no means always. Indeed, its periodic delegate meetings were often presented with a number of

¹ Clifford, *op. cit.*, pp. 5, 159-60; *Minutes*, March and April-May 1873.

² District emigration funds were explicitly authorized by the 1875 Annual Council. The Oxford district preferred emigration abroad to migration within Britain, since the latter was "very temporary." As a result it claimed in 1877 to be far less affected than neighbouring districts by the industrial down-turn.—*Oxf. Chron.*, 1 Nov. 1873; 24 March 1877.

faits accomplis in the form of claims for lock-out or emigration pay, which they either accepted or rejected according to circumstances.¹ Above all, the district conducted a constant battle to persuade the branches to make their financial payments regularly and in due form; it was never entirely successful, and sometimes could give only a vague estimate of the size of its membership. Indeed, there recur in the minutes resolutions empowering the treasurer "to take what steps are necessary to make the district a/c properly balance" and "to get proper books to keep each branch a/c separate." In this, as in other administrative matters, the union was very slow to translate aspiration into reality.

In the end, the success or failure of the union turned very largely on the management of its branches. Sometimes this was good, as at Long Crendon, said in 1879 to be the best contributing branch in the National Union and to contain a small co-operative grocery. At that year's annual meeting its officers sought to retire (in disgust with Arch), and, since nobody was prepared to replace them, this would have brought the branch to an end. Sometimes the branch management was indifferent, as at Wendlebury where the treasurer had to be reprimanded for carelessness in attending meetings and handling money, or at Milton and Shipton which seem to have been torn by disputes from 1874 to 1876. Occasionally it was worse—a number of the branch secretaries who left the National Union in 1875 retained the money that had been collected for it.²

In theory, of course, the National's system of centralization should have prevented this dependence on local factors. In practice I very much doubt whether it justified its cost. Of course, the undertaking was far from easy—in 1875 the National had the largest membership of any *registered* union, but in terms of annual income it ranked only seventh,³ and its membership was not only poor but also, by urban standards, highly dispersed. Nevertheless, its management cannot be said to have been businesslike. For this, however, the labourers themselves should not be greatly blamed. Not all the delegates to the 1873 National conference were literate.⁴ And even the invaluable ex-

¹ The term 'lock-out' also covered strikes.

² For inability to give its membership, see the *Oxf. Chron.*, 24 March 1877, p. 8 (and for a similar Warws. confession, the *Lab. U. Chron.*, 7 April 1877, p. 2). For resolutions about the acquisition of account books etc., see *Minutes*, March and July 1873, Feb. and Nov. 1875. For the branch management, see the *Oxf. Chron.*, 8 March 1879, p. 8; *Minutes*, Sept. and Nov. 1874, April 1876; *Lab. U. Chron.*, 7 April 1877, p. 5.

³ *P.P.*, 1877, LXXVII, p. 144. On the same basis the Kent Agricultural and General ranked ninth and eleventh, the Lincolnshire League eleventh and fourteenth.

⁴ *Lab. U. Chron.*, 21 June, p. 5. And in 1878 the Oxford district secretary could deprecate the competence of the original personnel at his level.—*Ibid.*, 8 June, p. 4.

perience that many had gained from chapels and benefit societies was not entirely relevant. For the unions, to be successful, had to operate on a far larger scale. And they almost inevitably encountered opposition and conflict of a kind not met with by philanthropic or religious undertakings.

The labourers were, indeed, conscious of their limitations, and pathetically grateful for the sympathy and assistance of their social superiors. But they were rather unfortunate in their helpers. To some extent, this was to be expected. Any movement that went in for emigration was bound to encounter some unscrupulous agents, like Thomas Alsop the representative of Brazil,¹ or the engaging character who simultaneously advocated emigration to the labourers and a continuation of the lock-out to the farmers.

But the gentlemen sympathizers were also fairly mixed. Thus Samuel Morley supported the agricultural labourers, as he did so many other progressive charities, but felt that unions should usually be "mere organizations for promoting migration and emigration." Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice helped to introduce the West of England union to Wiltshire in 1872, but seems, nevertheless, to have identified himself primarily with the country gentlemen. And his associate, Canon Girdlestone, was, on his earlier record, drawn on to the National Union's consulting committee, but proved fundamentally unsympathetic both towards strikes and towards the union's wider activities. Such men did not value the 'Revolt of the Field' for its trades-union content, but for either philanthropic or political reasons.²

There were, too, the eccentrics, like W. G. Ward or Professor Newman. Ward we have already met in Herefordshire. He began by opposing strikes on the grounds that he could not be sure that the labourers' sense of justice would preserve them from pressing their advantage too far. But he rapidly overcame these scruples and joined the National Union's consulting committee. By 1873, he had progressed to writing a letter that could be construed as advocating arson and that caused a considerable upset at the annual conference. Again Professor F. W. Newman's attitude towards trades unions was one of conventional hostility, but he was ready to speak on behalf of the agricultural labourers, and in 1875 he told an American friend (out of the blue) that he was now "*President* of a Farm Labourers' Union, which has so

¹ There can be no doubt that emigration to Brazil was advocated from union platforms and conducted, at least in part, under union auspices. See e.g. *Dors. Exp.*, 10 Dec. 1872; *Heref. T.*, 22 Feb. 1873, p. 10; *Oxford Journal*, 12 April 1873. This was the more discreditable since official cautions had already been issued against such emigration, which proved disastrous.—*P.P.*, 1873, xviii, pp. 310 ff., 389.

² Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 71; Fitzmaurice to Dilke, 26 Dec. 1882.—B.M.Add. MS. 43882; *Oxford Journal*, 30 March 1872; E. Selley, *Village Trades Unions in Two Centuries*, 1919, p. 88; Clifford, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

little support that I cannot tell whether it will sink or swim."¹ Ward was also prominently associated with this 'New Union', the product of disillusion with the National's financial laxity, general ill success, and inability to provide land for the labourer. In banner headlines, it offered allotments and smallholdings (to be balloted for among contributors). These were to be obtained by investing subscriptions in the hire or purchase of land, while at the same time issuing members with promissory notes. The scheme was costed on the totally unrealistic basis of 100,000 members. And the honorary secretary even promised that the value of members' subscriptions would be doubled in three years.²

The labourers were not likely to gain all that much from such adherents. Indeed, they did not begin to get the sound business advice they needed—and deserved—until after 1875, when the split induced Samuel Morley to overhaul the union's finances and introduce a number of common-sense reforms. But, by then, the economic climate was singularly unpropitious for purely trades union activities. According to Arch, there had always been pressure "to have the cart of agricultural reforms stuck before the Union horse."³ Now such pressures became more difficult to resist, and the labourer's interests underwent considerable diversification, notably into emigration, insurance, charities, allotments, and politics.

Of course, none of these channels was new. But all were further developed. Indeed by 1879 the secretary of the Oxford district of the National Union could write to the papers from the union's offices, styling himself 'General Emigration Agent, Emigration Office', and asserting that "emigration is admitted to be the only way out of the difficulty the working classes have to meet with in this country."⁴ Such a transition was very natural. For, on the one hand, emigration was an obvious way of improving conditions, and, particularly after the Brazil fiasco, unions came to feel a responsibility for supervising it. Arch was accordingly sent on a fact-finding tour of Canada in 1873. Equally, too, the calling of emigration agent could be profitable: Simmons said that the intermediary between the colonial agent and the labourer was paid a commission of up to 5 per cent of the full fare out.⁵

Certainly a large number of union leaders either themselves emigrated

¹ For Ward, see the *Heref. T.*, 13 April 1872, p. 10, 18 May, p. 11; A. Clayden, *The Revolt of the Field*, 1874, pp. 145 ff.; Howard Evans, *Radical Fights of Forty Years*, n.d., p. 38. For Newman, see his letters to E. Sargent of 24 Oct. 1875 and e.g. 20 Jan. 1879.—Microfilm copies from the Public Library, Boston, Mass., U.S.A.

² *Lab. U. Chron.*, 14 Aug. 1875, pp. 4-5, and *passim*.

³ *The Story of His Life*, pp. 118-21.

⁴ *Oxf. Chron.*, 15 March, p. 9.

⁵ *P.P.*, 1882, xiv, questions 61371-4. See also the Oxford district's *Minutes*, March 1875.

or acted as emigration agents (or both).¹ It is less easy to say how far the ordinary labourers followed them. Simmons claimed in 1881 to have sent 4,000 men (or nearly 10,000 people) out of Kent; and, in the same year, Arch was speaking in terms of three-quarters of a million people (albeit not all from unionized areas).² This latter claim was clearly excessive. But the emigration statistics do suggest that the 'Revolt of the Field' had a very appreciable impact, even though other factors were also of importance.³ Besides increasing the total volume of emigration, union intervention may also have temporarily altered its direction. Arch claimed that in 1874-5 union-sponsored emigrants to Canada outnumbered those to Australasia by about 4 to 2½,⁴ whereas in 1869-72 more than half the total agricultural labourers went to Australasia and in 1876-82 considerably more than half.

In Lincolnshire, in Mr Russell's words, the conflict of 1874 "was followed by compromise, and the compromise . . . by an intensified drive for emigration by the unions"; this constituted a more indirect strategy than had their wages claims of the early part of the year. But the Lincolnshire League pulled in its horns in other ways also: in January 1875 its executive committee remarked that since expenditure (and central demands) had fallen, each district must now be saving money; and by May we find its members recommended to "aim at making the Amalgamated Labour League one of the best organized, and best managed benefit clubs in the world." The other unions also underwent a similar development. Thus the Kent and Sussex established its sick benefit section in 1875; and the same year saw the establishment of at least nine sick and benefit funds by local organizations of the National Union.⁵ The process continued in 1876, and by 1877 the time had come for some rationalization. Accordingly the Lincolnshire League moved to

¹ A list would include such figures as: Simmons (secretary of the Kent and Sussex Union); Taylor (secretary of the National Union); Vincent (editor of the *Lab. U. Chron.*); Clayden (author of *The Revolt of the Field*); Holloway and Leggett (the first chairman and the first secretary of the Oxford district); Bayliss (that district's secretary from 1874-9); Richardson (founder of the Aylesbury district); and Challis (founder of the Sawston, Cambs., district).

² *P.P.*, 1882, XIV, questions 61371-4, 58422-9, 60354.

³ Emigration of male agricultural labourers from the U.K. was: in 1869, 1.6 thousand; 1870, 1.8; 1871, 1.4; 1872, 2.5; 1873, 3.7; 1874, 6.9; 1875, 5.4; 1876, 3.4; 1877, 4.1; 1878, 6.1; 1879, 4.1; 1880, 3.9; 1881, 2.7; 1882, 5.7. Until 1876, figures relate to departures of all nationalities to 'Places outside Europe'; from 1877 to U.K. nationals only and to all places though this change is probably not significant. It is important that these figures include Irish emigrants. They are derived from *P.P.*, 1876, XLII, and from the annual returns of the Emigration Commissioners.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 254 (written, admittedly, long after the event).

⁵ In Bucks., Glos., Oxon., Kent, Northants., Staffs., Suffolk and Cambs., and Wilts.; Herefordshire, Worcs., and Warws. already possessed comparable societies.

establish a uniform scale of subscriptions and entry fees and a centralized deaths fund, and the National Union formed a central sick benefit society that took over the more solvent of its local ones.¹ Most of the local societies were very small; but Simmons claimed 9,000 members for his Kent and Sussex society, and Arch's statements are consistent with a membership of about 4,000 in 1879-80.²

Of course it was common for industrial trades unions to provide facilities for insurance; and some such facilities were clearly very necessary. Moreover, union speakers had promised them from the beginning. Their prospect was one of the union's principal attractions, and they had occasionally even been implemented at a branch level.³ Nevertheless, their constitution under union auspices was an unfortunate development. For, the unions being evanescent, so were their benefit funds. And, contrariwise, the actuarial unsoundness of its benefit funds brought Arch's union into discredit.

More hopeful were the labourers' attempts to reform local charities and to secure allotments. As can be seen from the printed lists in many churches, the problem of misplaced or mislaid charities was not new. But it was probably exacerbated, from the labourers' point of view, by the mid-century reforms and the diversion of funds to middle class education. In some areas, as we have seen, it played a substantial part in establishing the labourers' movement; and it survived to become one of "the stalking-horses of the [1889 county council] election contests." Accordingly, the unions devoted considerable attention to charities, especially in the later 1870's. Thus Banks claimed in 1879 to be investigating the charities of no fewer than forty parishes. And in 1877 there was a "great turmoil about the charities" of Withington, Glos., as a result of which they were distributed that winter with less regard for religious denomination than ever before. In that year the Oxford district had also been doing its best to secure the election of *bona fide* working men as churchwardens to get "a thorough investigation" of misappropriated charities; "already good results had sprung from this." In 1878 wide-spread attempts were made to contest elections or exhumate charities at the Easter vestry meetings; the *Labourers' Union Chronicle* reported them under the heading of 'The Battle of the Vestries'.⁴

¹ Those with funds of more than £1 a head.

² *The Labourer*, 16 Jan. and 1 May 1875; 25 Nov. 1876; 29 Dec. 1877; *P.P.*, 1882, xiv, questions 58413-20, 61117; Arch, *op. cit.*, pp. 297, 380-1.

³ See e.g. *Lab. U. Chron.*, 29 Nov. 1873 (Leics.); 5 Sept. 1874 (Stourpaine, Dorset); Clifford, *op. cit.*, pp. 92, 153.

⁴ *The Labourer*, 4 Jan. 1879; *Lab. U. Chron.*, 16 March and 4 May 1878; *Oxf. Chron.*, 23 March 1878; Springall, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-9; *County Council Magazine*, III, 1891, pp. 99-107.

One of the purposes of such activity was to procure allotments. Thus, in response to a question as to "how the labourer was to get possession of the bits of land for his own cultivation," one branch secretary reminded his audience of the existence of a couple of farms "which rightly belonged to the poor. Let them draw up a paper and get it signed by all persons interested in the estate, and then send it up to London to the Charity Commissioners. . ."¹ Such pressure for the land had, indirectly, a considerable effect. Admittedly union attempts directly to purchase land were seldom very successful. But the new-found independence that had led to the 'Revolt of the Field' caused also a more confident and persistent voicing of the labourers' demands at a local level. And it encouraged landlords to act on their belief that the provision of allotments was a specific for discontent. Finally, the advent of the 'Great Depression' increased the supply of land and lowered its value. The details of the process vary enormously from place to place, but the general trend is quite clear:² the number of allotments grew by over 40 per cent between 1873 and 1886; the rate of growth then almost doubled between 1886 and 1890; and thereafter it fell back sharply.³

It is difficult not to connect this acceleration in the mid-1880's with the agricultural labourers' acquisition of the parliamentary franchise in 1885. There had been demands for the franchise ever since 1872. It represented the logical consequence of attempts to secure the return of labourers to local elective bodies. Indeed, many men even thought it a prerequisite for reform at a more local level. The labourers' movement thus merged increasingly with the politics of the day, a number of its leaders accepting minor roles in the Liberal party. Its political potentialities had always constituted one of its attractions to gentlemen radicals; and, by 1885, Birmingham politicians had come to rely heavily on an appeal to the new voters. The Conservatives, of course, soon replied in kind. So, especially before the 1892 elections, the country was treated to the spectacle of the two great parties holding conferences on the rural question that were (apart from their party-political affiliations) surprisingly similar in content. Interestingly enough, their participants came from more or less the areas in which we have seen trades unionism to have been concentrated in the 1870's. Northumberland still remained consciously aloof, the Liberal delegate from Hexham remarking that "he had been painfully impressed with the instances which had been

¹ *Oxf. Chron.*; *Oxford Journal*, 3 Aug. 1872.

² Thus in the early 1890's there was a surplus of allotments at Buntingford, Herts., and some were being given up around Cirencester, Glos., whereas there had been a long struggle "which is only now terminating" to secure allotments in some villages around Stratford-on-Avon.

³ *P.P.*, 1896, LXVII, pp. 520-1, 584.

mentioned of the tyranny of the squire and the parson in the southern and midland districts of England . . . there was nothing of that sort in Northumberland."¹

¹ *The Times*, 11 Dec. 1891 and 30 Jan. 1892.

Notes and Comments

THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The annual conference of the British Agricultural History Society was held at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, from Monday, 8 April, to Wednesday, 10 April 1968. An opening reception was given by the Vice-Chancellor of the University and was followed by dinner at which the Society's guests were the Vice-Chancellor, Dr Frank Thistlethwaite; Prof. R. Markham, F.R.S.; Prof. Sir Joseph Hutchinson, F.R.S.; Mr G. E. Fussell; Dr R. A. C. Parker; Mr G. Ordish, and Mr E. J. T. Collins.

Prof. Hutchinson opened the conference with a paper on 'Greek Agriculture and Agrarian History'. He was followed by Mr G. E. Fussell on 'Eighteenth-century Theories of Crop Nutrition'. Mr R. A. C. Parker set the scene for the excursion with a paper on 'The Coke Estate at Holkham', and during the excursion members were shown over Holkham Hall by Lord Leicester's estate agent, and shown round the farms by the farm manager. This was a most interesting and enjoyable visit. The conference ended with papers by Mr George Ordish on 'A Hundred and Fifty Years of Crop Pest Control', and by Mr E. J. T. Collins on 'Labour Supply and Harvesting Technique in Britain, 1790-1880'.

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This was held at Norwich on Tuesday, 9 April 1968, with Dr W. H. Chaloner in the chair. Mr G. E. Fussell was elected President of the Society in succession to Prof. H. P. R. Finberg, Mr C. A. Jewell was re-elected Treasurer, and Mr M. A. Havinden was re-

elected Secretary. Miss Audrey Beecham, Dr W. H. Chaloner, and Mr G. E. Fussell retired from the Executive Committee under rule. Dr Chaloner was re-elected and Dr D. R. Denman and Dr F. M. L. Thompson were elected to the vacancies.

In presenting the report of the Executive Committee, Dr W. H. Chaloner was pleased to record that, after a slight fall last year, membership had now risen from 645 to 672. He noted, however, that most of the new members were libraries, and that individual membership had fallen from 423 to 414, and expressed the hope that members would endeavour to recruit new subscribers. He paid tribute to the retiring President, Prof. H. P. R. Finberg, for all his good work during his term of office. As a founder member and first editor of the *REVIEW*, the Society owed him a very great debt. He also thanked the British Academy for a generous grant of £300 towards the costs of the *REVIEW*, and Prof. W. E. Minchinton for his work in editing the two volumes of *Essays in Agrarian History* which were successfully published this year under the Society's sponsorship. It was also gratifying to note the successful publication of Volume IV of the *Agrarian History of England*, edited by Dr Joan Thirsk, and the foundation of the first Chair of Agrarian History at a British University, at the University of Kent, to be occupied by Dr G. E. Mingay.

The Treasurer reported that the Society's finances were in a healthy condition and that this would allow the size of the *REVIEW* to be enlarged from 64 to 84 pages.

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