

‘Never-to-be-forgotten acts of oppression ... by professing Christians in the year 1874’. Joseph Arch’s Agricultural Labourers’ Union in Dorset, 1872–4^{*}

by Jo Draper

Abstract

Dorset was notorious in the mid-nineteenth century for its low agricultural wages and the poverty of its labourers. This paper traces the first years of union activity in the county, 1872–4. It is based largely on reports carried by a short-lived but sympathetic newspaper which are extensively quoted to give a flavour of the source and the extreme hostility the Union provoked. Particular attention is paid to Milborne St Andrew where in 1872 the farmers appear to have accepted at least some union demands for higher wages but dismissed pro-union labourers after the harvest of that year. A new strike in the spring of 1874 was countered by a lockout and evictions. The background to the much-reproduced photographs of the evictions at Milborne St Andrews is explained.

Rural trades unionism was slow to develop in England, then came in a sudden rush in the years before the formation of the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union in 1872.¹ That year, and 1873, were both ones of agitation and local strikes as the labourers’ unions took root and pressed for higher wages and a shorter working week. By the beginning of 1874 the National Union had somewhere in the region of 86,200 members: the labourers’ unions which remained outside of NALU may have had 49,000 more.² As there were over a million agricultural labourers, the unions’ hold over their constituency was never great. In 1874 the NALU became embroiled in a strike and lockout, sustained by the union’s ability to offer strike pay. The Revolt of the Field, as it came to be known, was particularly widespread in East Anglia having started at Exning in Suffolk in February. By mid-Summer some six thousand men were on strike pay: but the financial costs proved to be too great and on 27 July 1874 the Union recommended that its members return to work.

^{*} I am grateful to the editor for his help in bringing this paper to publication.

¹ For accounts of the early days of rural trades unionism, see P. Horn, ‘Labour organisations’, in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian countryside* (2 vols, 1981), II, pp. 580–90; J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural discontent* in *nineteenth-century Britain* (1974), esp. chs 4 (by Dunbabin) and 5 (by Horn) from which the following is largely drawn.

² Dunbabin, *Rural discontent*, pp. 75–6.

The idea of agricultural labourers' unions was decidedly in the air after 1870. By this time the idea of organised labour was much more established than it had been: statutes of 1869 and 1871 had removed any remaining question of the legality of unions. The formation of labourers' unions was a rural echo of the urban labour unrest of 1871–2 and the largely successful movement for a nine-hour working day. When the Warwickshire labourers began to combine in February 1872, forming the Warwickshire Agricultural Labourers' Union a few weeks later, they were only one of several regional labourers' unions. The Warwickshire union, led by Joseph Arch, a hedgecutter and Primitive Methodist preacher, drew other unions into its orbit and emerged as the largest single union. The NALU never achieved a monopoly position as the labourers' representative: other unions – including the Lincolnshire League – steadfastly maintained their independence from Arch's union. The development of urban trades unionism also provided a framework of support for their rural brethren, not least in the collections made on behalf of striking farm labourers which sustained the strikes of 1874. Moreover, aspects of change in the countryside were also tending to radicalise the labourer. There was a greater access to the outside world through the circulation of cheap newspapers; and a greater ease of travel. Labourers may also have been unsettled by the knowledge that higher wages and greater status could be secured through migration or emigration abroad. One of the roles of the first generation of unions was assisting migration and emigration both to allow its members to secure a higher standard of living but also to place rural employers under pressure by encouraging rural depopulation. Arch toured Ontario in late 1873 at the invitation of the Ontario government to assess the prospects for employment; and when he spoke at Dorchester and Birmingham in December of that year, it was in the company of Colonel Denison, the 'Emigration Representative of the Government of Ontario'.³

The question of what the Union achieved during its sudden efflorescence has been the subject of much debate amongst both contemporaries and historians. Some have been dismissive of its achievement, arguing that wages would have edged upwards in the 1870s even without union action. The union claimed that it had secured substantial increases of (even) 3s. or 4s. a week. The most recent analysis gives it credit for raising wages in the short term, but only by a very small amount – a few per cent – overall.⁴ The importance of these years may lie in the longer term as part of the labourers' – and the farmers' – political education.

Dorset was the county of the Tolpuddle Martyrs: amongst those who made early contact with Arch were men from the county. It would not be thought of as a county which contributed a great deal to the Revolt of the Field. In a list of the numbers of men being supported by the Union in June 1874, the number 'on funds' was 1,963 in Suffolk, 339 in Essex, 376 in Cambridgeshire, smaller numbers in other eastern counties, but a mere 23 in Dorset. Other than 10 in Gloucestershire, these were the only people in a west of England county in receipt of strike pay from NALU.⁵ Their importance was more enduring than their numbers might suggest. When some of them were evicted from cottages in Milborne St Andrew in June 1874, the Union's local organiser arranged for a photographer to be present. The resulting pictures

³ *The Times*, 19 Dec. 1873.

⁴ G. R. Boyer and T. J. Hatton, 'Did Joseph Arch raise agricultural wages? Rural trades unions and the labour

market in late nineteenth-century England', *EcHR* 47 (1994), pp. 310–44.

⁵ *The Times*, 15 June 1874.

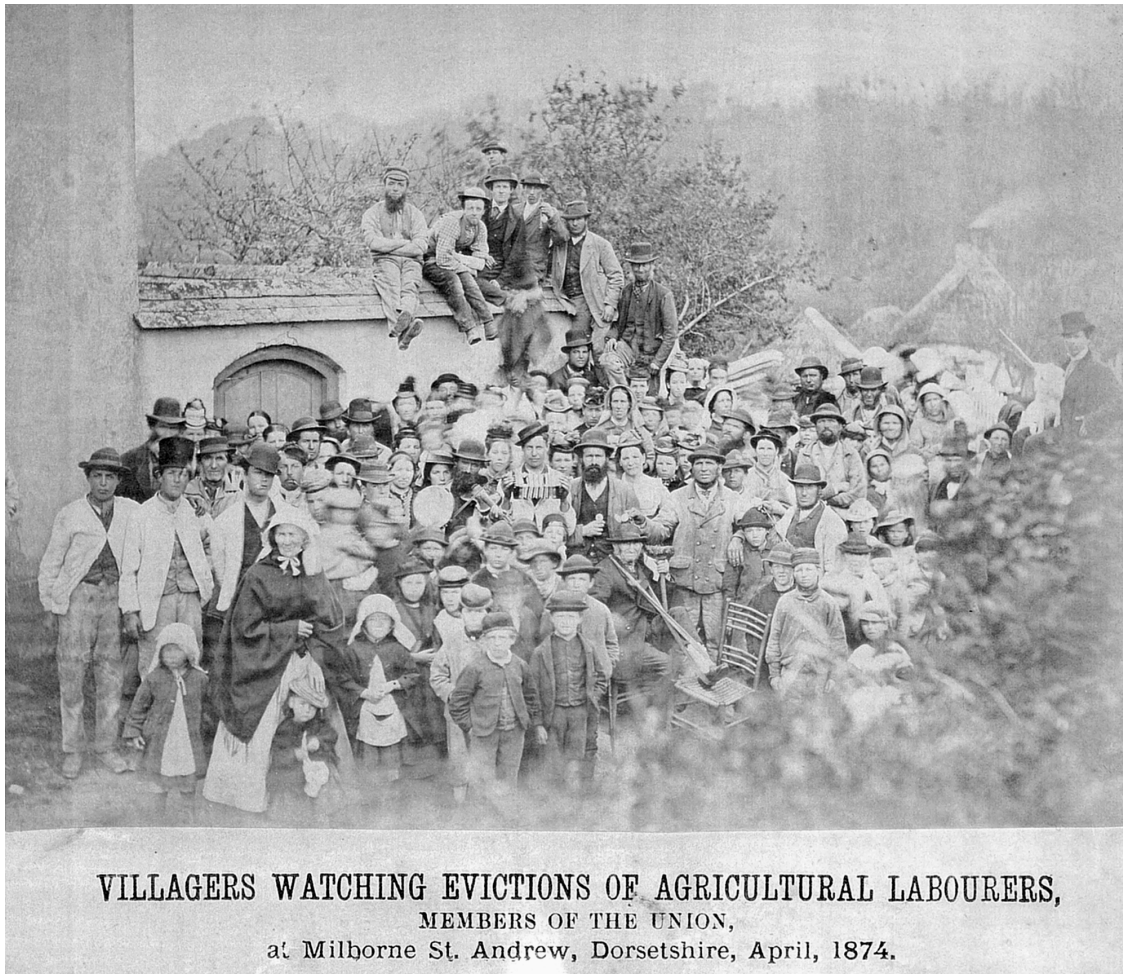


FIGURE 1. The crowd watching the evictions at Milborne St Andrew, April 1874, with the original printed caption. There are at least 35 men, 31 women and 16 children present. Courtesy Dorset County Museum.

circulated widely within the county and acquired an iconic standing (Figures 1, 5 and 6). They have also been reproduced widely in modern works. In this paper, our purpose is to explore the agitation for higher wages and a shorter working week in Dorset in 1872-4, explaining the circumstances in which these photographs were taken.

I

Dorset labourers' wages were notoriously low from at least the 1790s, and these low wages were at least part of the cause for the 'Captain Swing' riots of 1830. Falling wages were the spur for the Dorsetshire Labourers (the Tolpuddle Martyrs) to set up a tiny trades union in 1834. There were several Chartist meetings in Dorset in 1838 (as there were all over the country), and the speakers (unsuccessfully) encouraged labourers to join a union and improve their wages.

The state of the Dorset labourers was summarised by Tufnell in a report of 1844. 'In a great part of this district wages are so low, that they cannot fall, and the distress of the county does not affect the labouring classes. Their *normal* state is one of the deepest privation, to lower which should be to depopulate the land'.⁶

There are two descriptions of wages in the county from the 1860s. The 1860–1 national return shows Dorset second to bottom in the country with a weekly wage of 9s. 5d. The 1867 royal commission report found it difficult to calculate how much the Dorsetshire labourers earned, although the commissioner, Stanhope, stated that the wages 'are less, and present a greater variety, than in any county visited by me' because of payments in kind. He found that an ordinary labourer usually earned 8s. with a cottage, or 9s. if paying rent, with extra money at harvest and some potato ground. Stanhope thought 1s. a week rent low, but 'the cottages of this county are more ruinous and contain worse accommodation' than any other county with which he was familiar except Shropshire. Godolphin Osborne, the reformer who knew the county well, considered that taking into account all perquisites, an average wage throughout the year was 11s. a week.⁷ The low wages of Dorset agricultural labourers suggest that they needed trades unions, but there was little unionism in Dorset before 1872.

II

Joseph Arch's National Union of Agricultural Labourers was founded in May 1872, the Warwickshire Agricultural Labourer's Union having been formally established on 29 March. Only a few weeks later it was stated at a meeting of labourers at Blandford that there were already three or four hundred union members in Dorset.⁸ In June at Winterborne Kingston (just east of Milborne St Andrew) a labourers' meeting was chaired by Alfred Martin, the leader of the strike at Milborne.⁹ This was the stormiest of meetings. A 'great uproar prevailed throughout the meeting occasioned by a numerous party of farmers, some of them carrying formidable looking walking sticks, which were continually flourished over some of the men's heads, but no blows were struck'. Instead of a labourers' meeting, it turned into a bitter dialogue between the farmers and labourers, reported verbatim by the newspaper:

A farmer, 'The labourers' wives wear as fine bonnets here as the farmers' wives do.' (A voice: 'If they do it is by sitting up day and night gloving; they do not get it out of the farmers: they do not get old clothes or parish coals.') Mr Besant [farmer of Milborne St Andrew] said 'The labourers do very well with what they have got.' A labourer replied, 'We do not; I have thrashed in your barn with only turnip greens for my dinner.' Mr. Besant replied, 'I know you are a good-for-nothing fellow.' A farmer said 'It is enough to make a farmer's hair stand on his head to hear what you men say; we can't get enough out of the land to pay such wages.'

⁶ Jo Draper, 'The 1830s "Captain Swing" riots in Dorset – an eyewitness account', *Proc. Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Soc.* 124 (2002), pp. 21–34; id., 'William Barnes and "The Unioners" in Dorset', *South-eastern Hist.* 22 (2000), pp. 207–21; E. C. Tufnell, 'Report on the state of labourers in Dorset', BL, Add. Ms 40,587,

fo. 162.

⁷ Stanhope, *Report*, pp. 3–6; Peter Dewey, 'Farm Labour', in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VII (i) (2000), pp. 830–1.

⁸ *Weymouth Telegram* (hereafter WT), 15 June 1872.

⁹ WT, 22 June 1872.

If we give the money instead of perquisites, they will steal what they get as perquisites now.' A voice replied, 'If you pay them they will not want to steal.' Mr. Allington [union rep] said, 'I have noticed you gentlemen farmers ride better horses than the owners of the land, and I also know that when a farm is to let there are plenty of farmers after it, and yet they say they can get nothing out of it. If they do with less luxuries they could give better wages.' A farmer replied, 'I have no luxuries whatever – I have only bread and bacon – I never have butcher's meat – I give my men as good as 15s. a week.' Mr Allington asked the meeting if that statement was true. Many voices replied 'it is not true.' A labourer said 'I have worked for days with nothing but bread.' A woman said 'Her son had worked for the farmers till he was nineteen years of age, and then he only received 4s. a week.' Mr. Besant said 'That was more than he was worth.' The mother, 'How was it then that his next master at Bournemouth gave him 16s.' A farmer said 'It is written in scripture that thy bread shall be given thee and thy water shall be sure.' Mr. Allington replied 'It is true the Lord has promised it, and he has sent plenty, but you farmers withhold it from the poor, and the Lord will judge the oppressors of the poor.' At the close of the meeting one man was paid off on the spot for joining the union, the man's son also receiving his wages. The farmers departed amid a perfect storm of hooting and hissing. The deputation was afterwards drawn by the men, in the waggon that served as a platform, in triumph through the village, and thus terminated one of the most stormy meetings it is possible to imagine.

In the same issue the *Telegram* reported the Blandford branch of the Labourers' Union resolving 'to carry on the movement quietly, and in the most respectful way to employers; to ask for 12s. a week with cottage and garden for men residing in the villages and 15s. per week for those in town'.¹⁰

The next week it was reported that some farmers in Winterborne Kingston had agreed to a rise in wages. A mass meeting of labourers at Fordington near Dorchester were told of the Whitchurch labourers who

had acted very honourably and creditably. They handed in their memorial for 12s. a week and perquisites or 15s. a week without perquisites. One gentleman said he would not give it, and they went home. They were sent for in about three-quarters of an hour, and the master said he would give it to them, but not to one man who had been rather prominent; but, said the man, 'If you don't give it him, master, you won't to us'.

The farmer gave in.¹¹ In July the *Telegram* reported rises in wages being given in Frampton and Cerne Abbas (a compromise at 2s. more rather than the 3s. sought) and it seems several other places too.¹² In 1872 the Union, as elsewhere, was not just helping the men to get better wages: they had a deliberate policy of assisting men to move away from Dorset. This was intended to have a double benefit: the men got better wages or prospects, and a shortage of labour in Dorset served to maintain wages. Men were leaving for the North of England where agricultural wages were higher, from at least June 1872, when thirty left Blandford for the Manchester area. The

¹⁰ WT, 22 June 1872.

¹¹ WT, 29 June, 6 July 1872. Probably Winterborne Whitchurch between Milborne and Winterborne

Kingston is meant.

¹² WT, 13 July, 20 July 1872.

Union also helped men to emigrate to Canada, or less successfully to Brazil. Many letters from emigrants were published in the newspapers during the 1872–4 dispute, with the farmers and landowners quoting those from unhappy emigrants, the Union those from satisfied ones. By January 1874 the Union estimated that between seven and eight hundred labourers had left the county with its assistance.¹³

By mid-July 1872 the Union had 2,000 members in Dorset. Joseph Arch himself spoke at a meeting on Fordington Green on 17 July.¹⁴ Thomas Hardy heard Arch speak in Dorset on one of his visits, possibly this one, and thought ‘there was a remarkable moderation his tone, and an exhortation to contentment with reasonable amelioration, which to an impartial auditor, went a long way in the argument. His views showed him to be rather the social evolutionist ... than the anarchic irreconcilable’. ‘Nobody who saw and heard Mr Arch in his early tours through Dorsetshire will ever forget him and the influence his presence exercised over the crowds he drew ... It was impossible to hear and observe [him] for more than a few minutes without perceiving that he was a humorist – moreover, a man by no means carried away by an idea beyond the bounds of common sense’.¹⁵

In August the conflict became more bitter. At the close of a Union meeting at Briantspuddle ‘a collection was made on behalf of three families whom the steward of H. Frampton, Esq. had turned out of doors, and whose things were still on the side of the road’. The Union was hoping to take legal action. The ‘cruel evictions at Affpuddle and Moreton’ were referred to at a meeting in Fordington in September, ‘those who had sanctioned them were not Christians, they had not the hearts of men’.¹⁶

Relationships between farmers and men remained difficult during the harvest of 1872. In 1873 the *Telegram* reported of autumn 1872 in the north of the county:

JOHN: What, beant us gwain to ha’ neer a harvest whoam t’year measter.

MASTER: No, John, harvest homes were meant as a thankoffering from the master to the man for having put his best foot foremost in a trying time, but harvest homes, and strikes, and unkindness from man to master is hardly fit to meet with a harvest feast.

JOHN: Well, measter, man and bwoy I ha’ worked on this farm for fifty year, but nover knowed us go wi’out a harvest whoam before.

MASTER: Aye, John, and I have known your father before you, and never heard of Unions, and strikes, and countrymen being told by lazy Cockney fellows that they *must leave off work in the midst of harvest before this year*.

This was part of a conversation upon the interruption in the harmonies of farm life, and something very similar must have occurred at Bradford [Abbas] last year, as we missed the usual invitation to our friend’s harvest festival. The truth is that the talk of strikes had made matters uncomfortable. Some men had refused to tie up wheat after a machine, and as matters did not otherwise promise well for harmony, our friend, Professor Buckman, reluctantly declined to hold the usual feast. We are, however, glad to know that this year the men were

¹³ WT, 5 June 1872, 23 Jan. 1874.

¹⁴ WT, 20 July 1872.

¹⁵ Thomas Hardy, ‘The Dorsetshire labourer’, *Long-*

man’s Magazine 2 (1883), pp. 252–69.

¹⁶ WT, 17 Aug., 21 Sept. 1872.

regaled with the very best of fare, and heartily welcomed, and as we have heard from one of them, 'both maester and man enjoyed thirselves more than ever I knowed 'em afore' and we understand that the master complimented them all upon the manly and harmonious manner in which they had gone through the harvest, telling them at the same time that if they really meant to be independent, and could exercise a little self-denial to enable them to keep off the parish, and limit their wants to that amount of drink that 'would cheer but not inebriate', he for one would be quite ready to welcome an increase of wages.¹⁷

In the west of the county, where there seem to have been fewer Union members, the chairman of the Broadwindsor, Burstock and Stoke Abbott Agricultural Society said in late September that he 'trusted the labourers as body would not listen to those stump orators who were going about the county', and the local rector, the Rev. Preb. Malan explained that 'it was designed of God that men should live together in harmony, each keeping to his respective position, with obedience and diligence'. A farmer was even clearer: there were 'prowling about the county a number of agitators with the view of setting the men against their master and breeding general discord where there was content and happiness'.¹⁸

In November 1872 Mr Collins, schoolmaster at Piddlehinton and author of an anti-Union pamphlet, held a meeting at Winterborne Stickland to tell the labourers about Unions. No discussion was to be allowed and 'Mr Collins spoke for nearly an hour, amidst considerable uproar'. When he finished, the labourers took over and passed a resolution that an Agricultural Labourers' Union was 'a great necessity and calculated to put the labourer in his true and right position'. Not what Mr Collins had intended at all.¹⁹ Later that month the Union claimed 3,000 members in Dorset. The 1871 census listed about 15,000 agricultural labourers in Dorset, so the proportion of Union Members was not high.²⁰

In December Robert Fowler of Winterborne Whitchurch, a parish adjacent to Milborne, addressed the Blandford Agricultural Society on the labour problem.²¹ Fowler saw himself as a spokesman for farmers within the county, a role which resulted in his standing as an independent candidate against the Conservatives in the Dorset by-election of 1876, the first tenant farmer to stand in the county.²² This lay in the future. In 1872 Fowler was known to the Union

¹⁷ WT, 10 Oct. 1873.

¹⁸ *Bridport News*, 4 Oct. 1872. Malan was vicar of Broadwindsor 1845-85, a scholar and great traveller. see A. N. Malan (ed.), *Soloman Caesar Malan DD. Memorials of his life and writings* (1897).

¹⁹ WT, 16 Nov. 1872.

²⁰ WT, 30 Nov. 1873. For the number of labourers, B. Afton and M. Turner, 'Agrarian occupations', in *Agrarian History VII* (ii), p. 1986.

²¹ Robert Fowler was born in 1823 and so was aged about 50 at the time of the disputes. He died in 1879 (parish register, brass plaque in Winterborne Whitchurch church).

²² This was the first parliamentary election in the county with the ballot box rather than public voting. *The Times* referred to Fowler as 'the candidate of the tenant

farmers' and reported that the contest was 'virtually between landlords and tenants, Mr Fowler going in strongly for reform in local taxation' (31 Jan. 1876). Fowler objected to the selection of candidates by a cabal and was reported in the *Dorset County Chronicle* as saying that 'These matters had generally been settled for them [the voters]. Two or three of the county gentleman met together and it was arranged between them who should be the representative'. Fowler said that he had been asked to stand 'on the solicitation of a large party of electors in the county' and was reported as saying in a speech that 'The great landowners of the county had two representatives already [in parliament] but a great body of voters in the industrious classes had no one to represent them'. *Dorset County Chronicle*, 13 Jan., 3 Feb. 1876. He was defeated by 3060 votes to 1866.

as one of its most intransigent opponents. At a meeting in Bridport, in mid-Summer, a National Union delegate had reported:

Mr Fowler, of Whitechurch had been the greatest opponent they had had in Dorsetshire. He made some statistical statements in the papers. The speaker challenged him to prove his statistics, but he had not come forward to do so. His men asked for a rise. He said he would not give it; he would rather sell his crops. The man who bore the paper was to leave. On the Monday they came and asked him again. He said he would not give it, and they went back. The Union told them they would give them 8s. a week if they held out, and that was only one shilling less than their wages. He soon sent for them back again, and gave them what they asked. He (the speaker) believed he liked the men better for it. He now knew they were men. They had some power now. The Union was behind them. Unity was strength. Let them do their duty and the Union would elevate them.²³

In his address, Fowler lambasted those who earned more than 12s. a week on the land:

these men demanded a certain time for breakfast and dinner, and would not work for more than eight hours, and would have a certain amount of wages ... Occasionally in the busy season the employers were obliged to succumb in a measure to the demands, but when that season was past they took the leaders of the movement by the nose and discharged them, got rid of them. He had found that since taking that course he had met with no difficulty at all; his men had gone on very well. He had got rid of the troublesome fellows, and he advised everyone else to do the same ... Let them take by the nose those who usurped their master's places, let them discharge such persons, and turn them from their houses, let people say what they liked on the subject.²⁴

Fowler then had 'succumbed' like other employers when the demand for labour was greatest and the need most immediate: but the Union's confidence that they had changed the man had plainly been misplaced, Fowler having later taken the opportunity to rid himself of the union adherents amongst his workforce. Given his hard line against the Union in 1872, and his advice to evict labourers, it is surprising that it was in Milborne, the adjacent parish, that the evictions actually occurred. Besides suggesting that labourers be 'taken by the nose' and evicted from their cottages, Robert Fowler described the amenities of Winterborne Whitchurch:

In this parish is a church, chapel, boy's school, girl's school, reading room, co-operative store, allotment land, clothing club, friendly society (with over £1,000 invested), a common for the run of horse or cow at low charge, and labour for all willing hands.

The report of Fowler's hard-line speech prompted a succession of letters in the *Telegram*. 'Nunquam Dormio' replied that as Fowler did not remember

all the advantages enjoyed by the labourers in this village, I beg to say there are also in this village a public house, two grocers' shops, four shoemakers' shops, a large oak-tree in Whatcombe Lane, blacksmith's and carpenter's shops, a wall in front of the reading room, a man

²³ *Bridport News*, 12 July 1872.

²⁴ *Dorset County Chronicle*, 26 Dec. 1872.

who travels with tea and drapery, a very tall man, a thatcher, and a very short man, who is secretary of the reading room. Surely with all these advantages, the agricultural labourer ought to be contented.²⁵

The Union responded angrily to the nose-pulling suggestion, and in the newspaper 'A Union Man' repeated his words viz:

'Let them TAKE BY THE NOSE those who usurped their master's places, AND TURN THEM FROM THEIR HOMES. LET PEOPLE SAY WHAT THEY LIKED on the subject.'

I question the wisdom of the advice; and I would recommend farmers not to attempt pulling the noses of their labourers until Mr. Fowler has made the experiment. Let him begin by pulling the noses of one or two of his own labourers; and if they tamely submit, other farmers may safely adopt the same practice. At all events it would be wiser of Mr Fowler to select a small man for his first experiment.²⁶

Mr Snook, the Union official in Winterborne Whitchurch, relisted the advantages of the village, adding

But the writer ought to have stated that *all these advantages are granted through the kindness of T. [sic] C. Mansel-Pleydell, Esq.*, and, with the exception of the church, the writer of the letter in no way assists by contribution or otherwise these institutions. I cannot see what this has to do with the labourer's wages. We have also a goodly number of teetotallers in this village; this society is self-supporting, and no doubt is doing a considerable amount of good. In the spring of the year [1872] a branch of the Labourers' Union was formed in this village prior to which the wages were 9s. per week with perquisites; this caused a rise of wages during the summer months; but, immediately after the harvest the writer of a letter in your paper discharged six men who had worked on the same farm 143 years; or on an average of nearly 24 years each. The officer of this branch of the Union found they were discharged for no other reason than for joining the union. Being all men of good character, they were supported by the Union for several weeks, and all but two have left the village obtaining situations elsewhere. There is no surplus of labour in this village, as the young men leave and obtain situations in the police or as porters on the railway, &c ... Not content with these advantages, farmers want the poor people's cottages as well. I am sorry to say that some of the cottages in this village and others are in a very sad condition. There have been great improvements in the cottages the property of J. C. Mansel-Pleydell, Esq., in this village, as during the last 26 years there have been twenty new cottages built, most of them containing a sitting room, back kitchen, and three bed-rooms, besides other necessary offices, which are let to the labourers at one shilling per week. I think our motto should be the golden rule, to do to others as you would they should do to you. If the landlords had treated their tenants in the same manner as the farmers have the labourers for joining the Union, I am sure they would not have liked it, but would have

²⁵ WT, 10 Jan. 1873, 28 Dec. 1872.

²⁶ WT, 10 Jan. 1873.

complained more than the poor people who have had to leave at a fortnight for joining the union.²⁷

The state of the dispute was clearer early in 1873. The Union held two large meetings on the day of the Candlemas fair at Dorchester, the traditional hiring fair for labourers over a wide area. Two thousand people attended the first meeting of the Union at 11 a. m., and possibly as many at the second at 3 p. m., both on Fordington Green and both addressed by Joseph Arch and others.²⁸ The newspaper reported that 'wages have gone up from two to four shillings a week, the general run now being 10s. to 12s. a week with the usual perquisites, viz. House and garden, potato land, furze and from half-a-ton to a ton of coal for fuel-gristing-best at 6s. a bushel (now worth 7s. 6d.), with extra wages in hay and corn harvests, and sundry other smaller benefits . . . Disguise the truth however one might wish it, the Labourers' Union has occasioned the rise'.²⁹

These meetings were the peak of Union activity in Dorset. We have already seen how a farmer like Fowler was willing to make short term concessions and then sack labourers in the autumn. Some involuntarily found themselves without work and, as Mr Snook reported, left the district to find work elsewhere. 1873 saw a marked reaction to the Union amongst farmers. Both the Union and the farmers were trying to bypass the old hiring fairs and use more modern methods. For the first time *The Weymouth Telegram* and the *Bridport News* both contained large numbers of advertisements for labourers, carters and other agricultural workers. Several notices specified that 'No Unionists need apply'. The farmers were fighting back in other ways, sometimes in ways which offended the public. A newspaper published a letter from a tradesman who had a man working for him 'who was discharged by his master' for saying he had to consult with his fellow farm labourers before agreeing to work late.

Don't think sir, this is my grievance. Of course it is not. His master had a right to discharge him, and used that right. My complaint is that when the discharged man took other work which was not farmer's work at all, a farmer came and pressed the tradesman for whom he was at work to dismiss him. The tradesman yielded to the pressure and dismissed him. No fault was alleged against him except in connection with the strike, and I heard from the tradesman's own lips that he had no fault to find with the discharged man, and *discharged him only because he was dependent on the farmers for custom, and could not afford to offend them*. I am happy to say I do not know the name of the farmer who insisted on the man's dismissal, for the tradesman would not tell me. He (the tradesman), could not, as an honest man, help telling me why he dismissed him, because I had engaged the dismissed man to do some wood work for me, and therefore I had a right to ask why he was discharged.

The letter writer thought the farmer 'understood that the transaction was not one which would bear the light' and ended 'I hope this will be the last case of man-hunting in East Dorset'.³⁰

²⁷ WT, 10 Jan. 1873.

²⁸ WT, 21 Feb. 1873.

²⁹ WT, 21 Feb. 1873.

³⁰ WT, 21 Mar. 1873.

Occasionally the farmers formally combined to oppose the Union:

THE AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

The following agreement has been signed by nearly all the farmers possessing holdings on the Shaftesbury estates: – 'We the undersigned occupiers of land under the Dowager Marchioness of Westminster, feel that it is necessary that we should combine together to protect ourselves against the present organisation of the Agricultural Labourers' Union. We therefore agree with each other that we will not employ any member of the Agricultural Labourers' Union on our farms, and that we will, in the event of a scarcity of non-Union labourers, aid and assist each other during hay-making and harvest, when necessary. In forming this combination we do not wish to refrain from giving proper wages to the labourers, but to protest against combination and dictation promoted by paid agitators. – Dated June 7, 1873'.³¹

Other farmers looked for ways to reduce their dependence on labour and held the prospect of a shift to grazing as a threat over the labourers. Grassing the land 'to follow an example set in Ireland' to 'diminish the quantity of labour required' had been suggested at the Dorchester Farmer's Club in April 1872.³² Mr G. W. Homer, addressing the Dorchester Agricultural Society in July 1873, suggested that the labourers' agitation was diminishing the amount of work available to them.

There was not the acreage of turnips sown this year as there had been the last two, because the labourers had put on the screw at hoeing-time; and the consequence was that where he had one application for work the last two years he had had twenty this season – (Hear, hear). He made a point of employing every man who offered himself winter or summer if he could, but this year he had got everything done up as close as he could, and had turned away more than ever he did in his life. The reason was that last season the labourers put on the screw, and tried to reap an illegitimate advantage just at a critical point of the season, and now they had lost days and days work, and he was quite sure the labourers had now had the worst season for extra work they had ever had since they learnt to use the hoe – (applause).³³

The following year, 'A Looker On' reported: 'The employers, I find, intend to give up the growth of crops, giving much hand labour, such as mangold etc., and lay the thin soils down to grass, so that not more than half the labourers will again be required that hitherto have been employed'. Three of the labourers then on strike saw advantage in this. 'About grassin down the land, that's a wuld tale, and the sooner that's done the better, because then we think when it do come to be known that they be stopping to grow food for the people, Government will take it away and we labourers have it'.³⁴

³¹ WT, 20 June 1873.

³² *The Times*, 15 Apr. 1872

³³ WT, 28 Aug. 1873.

³⁴ WT, 8 May, 15 May 1874.

There was also propaganda. The *Weymouth Telegram* published an anti-Union poem which purported to be by a labourer:

TRADES UNIONS

I once thought the Union a very good plan,
And paid in my twopence a week like a man;
But I've thought better of it, and altered my mind,
For to live in such bondage I don't feel inclined.

"You must'nt do this" and "you're bound to do that",
A plain honest man knows not what to be at:
The delegate tells us it's all for the best,
And so 'tis for him, for he feathers *his* nest.

"Never work over-time", no matter for why –
House-falling – Crops harming – Deficient supply –
Let them rot! – let it fall! – but go home from your work,
A Unionist's duty is ... *Duty to shirk*

...

Well, I'm tired, and sick on't, and here is my mind,
Since to work is the lot of the bulk of mankind;
Let's rise a fresh Union that won't disunite,
And FREEDOM OF LABOUR we'll claim as our right.

Let rich men and poor men be brothers together,
And keep up their friendship through fair and foul weather;
This Union is playing a dangerous game,
For the *interests of masters and men are the same*.

and so on.³⁵ Farmers did not have the monopoly of unfair behaviour. In July two labourers of Compton Abbas, 'members of the Agricultural Union', were arrested for 'maliciously damaging two scythes', the property of two non-union labourers. One of them was additionally charged with setting fire to a stack of faggots. Firing ricks or faggots was traditional revenge, and it was occasionally suggested during the 1872–4 dispute that Unionists were revenging themselves on farmers by arson.³⁶

³⁵ WT, 23 July 1873 (about half the poem is reproduced here with four verses omitted after the third verse and three more at the end).

³⁶ WT, 18 July 1873. c.f. a report from the autumn. 'Mr Snook of Whitchurch ... denounced, with emphasis, the "cruel slander" that the union had encouraged their members to set fire to ricks – it was "a foul lie", and if any such members could be found in the Union let

them be pointed out, and their names should no longer disgrace the books. It was not by foul play they intended to push their cause' (WT, 21 Sept. 1872). Joseph Arch himself joked at a large meeting in Dorchester in December 1873, 'He had even been called the "Arch-Apostle of Arson" though he had always inculcated moderation'. *The Times*, 19 Dec. 1873.

Little is reported over the autumn and winter of 1873. The twenty-fifth annual meeting of the Wareham and Purbeck Labourers' Friend Society (dedicated to providing labourers with allotments, prizes for long service and the like) gave the farmers and landowners a chance to debate the labour problem. A farmer

was disposed to attribute it in some degree to the educational policy of the present Government. He thought the education now given to the labourers had a good deal to do with the dissatisfaction evinced. He thought the labourers were now-a-days educated beyond the sphere of life in which Providence had placed them; and that educating a man for a certain station without giving him the means to support it was doing harm instead of good.

Surprisingly, this seems to be the first time that education was blamed. Another farmer could not see there was a problem:

He believed himself, in spite of much that had been written to the contrary, that there had been no more contented person than the Dorset labourer; and he (Mr. Fyler) was not disposed to think that he was much worse off than his neighbours. He did not mean to say that he got so many shillings a week as some others, but with fuel, potatoe ground, gristing, cottage, &c, his pay was made fully equal to that of neighbouring counties. But unfortunately there had been an invasion of the county by a band of marauders, filibusters, or 'public speakers', who had held open-air meetings and told the labourers they had devoted their lives to their service, thought of nothing else by day, and dreamt of nothing else by night, and they found the Dorset labourers were a race of slaves, but if they would only follow their advice, and join the Union, they would be altogether in a different and better position. It was quite natural to expect that a certain number of un-educated men, and particularly those not the most competent as labourers, would be taken by such talk; but he believed many had now bitterly repented.

Mr Weld, a large landowner said:

It was very disgraceful to have demagogues coming through the county to sow discord amongst them. They had been not far from Lulworth, being sent for by one or two of the parishioners. They came and used most improper and impertinent language; and it was disgraceful and totally false in all respects. He (Mr Weld) asked the man what he called himself, and he said 'a public speaker!' – (laughter) – which was quite a new trade to him, and one which he had never heard before. It seemed to be his duty to go about making speeches, and endeavour to stir up the people to desert their employers. He hoped they would find they were not responded to in the way they expected.

This lack of respect from the lower orders was often mentioned. The President of the society, another farmer said:

It was perfectly natural for the labourer like anybody else to be anxious to improve his position; but then there were two ways of doing a thing. Suppose a labourer in the service of Mr. Jones at 10s. a week, hears that his neighbour in the employ of Mr. Brown gets 12s. It is perfectly natural that Jones's man should like to have as much as his neighbour, and if he went to his master in a civil and respectful manner, telling him everything was up, he had a wife

and family to support, and should be glad if he would give him the increase, probably if he were a good servant it would be acceded to; but, if he went in a bumptious manner, when the corn was cut, and demanded a rise or he would throw up his work at once, he did not think Mr. Jones or anybody else could be expected to do much for such a man.

It was not what the labourers wanted which was the problem, but the nasty way they were asking for it.³⁷

J. Floyer, MP for Dorset, addressing the Dorchester Farmers' Club in April 1874, talked about the state of agriculture, and with regard to the Unions, was also sympathetic to the labourers' predicament.

We must not be too hard on the labourer; men come to him and say 'You ought to have a piece of land, £1 a week and so on', and a man would hardly be flesh and blood when told instead of 15s. he ought to have £1 a week if he did not say 'I should like the £1 better'. No one can wonder at that. You may say they ought not to believe such men, but they come down here, and perhaps they have the gift of talking, and if the labourers are led astray and induced to enter the Unions you must not be much surprised.³⁸

But even as he addressed the Dorchester farmers, a new wave of strikes had begun. In March 1874 'Twenty agricultural labourers are now on strike at Compton Abbas and Fonthill Magna. They want, it is said, 15s. or 16s. a week, with proportionate rates for piece work. The Union leaders countenance this demand, so that it is not improbable there will be strikes in other villages in a few weeks'.³⁹ Perhaps in the light of their experience of 1872, farmers were now prepared to meet Union demands with a hard line: conversely the Union, operating from a position of weakness, was looking to secure a propaganda coup. This focuses our attention on events at Milborne St Andrew.

III

Dorset was still a county of large landowners. Nine people owned more than 10,000 acres in Dorset in 1873, and another 13 owned between five and ten thousand acres. J. C. Mansel-Pleydell, the main landowner in Milborne St Andrew, belonged to the latter category, owning 8,669 acres.⁴⁰ John Clavell Mansel-Pleydell (1817–1902) was born a Mansel and inherited Smedmore in south Dorset. He added Pleydell to his name on his marriage to the Pleydell heiress of the lands around Milborne. He took a degree at Cambridge and then read for the Bar. Mansel-Pleydell was founding President of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club in 1875, and remained President to his death in 1902, giving annual Presidential addresses which summarised advances in every science over the previous year. The Society's journal, describing a presentation to him in 1895 states 'In Dorset we all know him as an active magistrate, as a kindly neighbour, as a good landlord, as a thorough, sterling Englishman, and in a word, as a jolly good fellow all round'. His obituary in the same journal states 'it is impossible to give an

³⁷ WT, 31 Oct. 1873.

³⁸ WT, 17 Apr. 1874.

³⁹ WT, 20 Mar. 1874.

⁴⁰ J. P. Dodd, 'Dorset Agriculture, 1800–1854', *Proc. Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Soc.*, 102 (1980), pp. 7–13.

account of a life of such varied interests'. Mansel-Pleydell published extensively on the geology and flora of Dorset, wrote the first proper flora of the county; a book on its birds and another on the molluscs.⁴¹ Mansel-Pleydell did not himself farm at Milborne St Andrew: his lands were let to farmers, as was customary. In 1872 he lived at Longthorns on the boundary with Winterborne Whitchurch (to the north east) and acted very much as the squire of both parishes.

Milborne St Andrew lies on the broad swathe of chalk which runs right across Dorset. By 1872 this large village had lost its weekly market, but it still had a 'cattle, sheep and cheese fair' held on 30 November each year.⁴² The parish, which consisted of Milborne St Andrew and Milborne Stileham, was populous with 601 inhabitants in 1871 and 567 in 1881. Photographs from this era show a mixture of substantial brick houses and much smaller and meaner thatched cottages of the sort which, as we shall see, drew adverse criticism in the press (Figures 2-4). The census shows that the major employment category for men was that of agricultural labourer: over a third of males in the village in 1871 were given that occupational designation (Table 1). The 1867 Royal Commission into the employment of women and children in agriculture noted changes throughout the central area of Dorset.

... the chalk range of hills stretching through it from east to west has been to a great extent brought into cultivation in recent years, is occupied in large farms, and, though considerable effort has been made, the labourer is in some cases living at a long distance from his work. Yearly hiring, and the system of letting the cottages with the farm are common, one result of which has been the mode of hiring whole families.⁴³

The 1871 census also shows the pattern of farms in Milborne St Andrew. Joseph Fowler farmed a huge 960 acres, employing 29 men and boys. William Besant farmed 414 acres and had 14 men, three boys and two women. These are the only two farms of any size: three more farmers are listed, one with no acreage given (George Groves) and no employees, one with 36 acres and no employees and one with 42 acres and employing two men and a boy. At Milborne Stileham, there was a single farmer, John Standfield, with 430 acres, employing 17 men and 3 boys, and one farm bailiff. Joseph Fowler employed fewer men per acre (even adding in the son listed at the census) but this may be because more of his acreage was down to grass. He was still, by far, the largest employer in the parish. Fowler had three adult sons in his employment. As 'A Looker On' wrote in the *Weymouth Telegram*, Fowler 'has three able and willing sons, young men who can and now do the work of double the number of ordinary labourers. In this way, I am told, no less than £10 per week is actually saved in the wages account of this one farm'. Quite how saving three labourers' wages of 10-12s. a week can be made into £10 a week was never explained. Three of the labourers on strike had a letter in the *Telegram* the following week. 'We think our master penny wise and pound foolish: "Looker-on" says he save £10,

⁴¹ Anon, 'Wimborne meeting', *ibid.*, 16 (1895), pp. xlvii-lii; Morton G. Stuart-Grey, 'In memoriam: the late John Clavell Mansel-Pleydell Esq. of Whatcombe', *ibid.*, 23 (1902), pp. lxxii-lxxii. An earlier version of this article was entered for the Mansel-Pleydell Essay Competition (founded by the same J. C. Mansel-Pleydell) in

2003, and was rejected as 'too one-sided'.

⁴² *Kelly's Directory* (1875 edn), p. 823.

⁴³ E. Stanhope, 'Report' [on Dorset] in *Second Report of the Commission for the employment of children, young persons and women in agriculture, Appendix, Reports from the Assistant Commissioners* (BPP, 1868-9, XIII), p. 2.

TABLE 1. Milborne St Andrew parish, occupations from the 1871 and 1881 censuses

	1871				1881			
	<i>number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>not born in village</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>not born in village</i>	<i>%</i>
Persons without occupation in the census (including at school)	379	63.1			385	67.9		
Farm labourer (1871)/ agricultural labourer (1881)	64	10.6	11	17.2	64	11.3	26	40.6
Labourer	12	2.0	6	50.0	10	1.8	4	40.0
Carter	11	1.8	7	63.6	10	1.8	6	60.0
Carter's boy (1871); Farm boy (1881)	2	0.3	1	50.0	1	0.2	1	100.0
Shepherd	7	1.2	3	42.9	5	0.9	5	100.0
Dairyman	0	0.0			1	0.2	1	100.0
All other males with occupations	77	12.8	39	50.6	63	11.1	41	65.1
Field worker female	3	0.5	0	0	0	0.	0	0
Dairymaid	0	0.0			2	0.4	2	100.0
All other females with occupations	46	7.6	26	56.5	26	4.6	14	53.8
Total with occupations	222	36.9	93	41.9	182	31.1	100	54.9
TOTAL	601	99.9			567	100.0		

Note: includes Milborne Stileham.

and we say lose £20 ... We three whose names is under this, seeing it said that our late employer has three sons who can do as much as six of we, do challenge these three sons to do any agriculture work for any amount they like to name'. This does not seem to have been taken up. 'One of those on Strike' retorted in the same issue, 'I have only to say if he calls saving being obliged to plough in the weeds in his fields, because he has not sufficient hands to clean the land, I am inclined to think that the extra labour which will result in cleaning the crops, will sadly diminish the so-called savings'.⁴⁴

Robert Fowler of Winterborne Whitchurch, who we met earlier addressing the Blandford Agricultural Society, farmed on an even larger scale. The 1871 census gives him as 'Landowner (Farmer) of 750 acres and half of 1100 acres employing 27 men and 4 women and 18 boys and half of 21 men, seven women and five boys. Maltster'. Overall then, he employed sixty five people. Dunbabin has suggested that the Union was stronger where farms were large, and that certainly holds true for this area.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ WT, 8 May, 14 May 1874.

agricultural trades unionism in the 1870s', *AgHR* 16

⁴⁵ J. P. D. Dunbabin, 'The incidence of organisation of (1968), pp. 124-5.

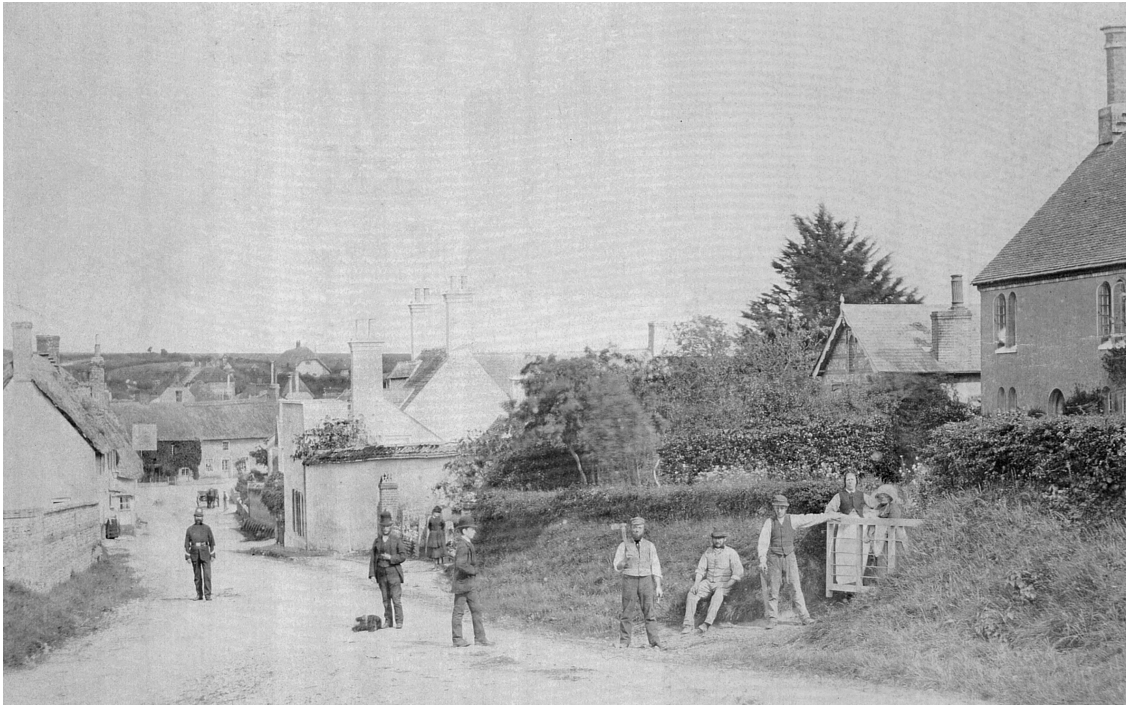


FIGURE 2. The main road through Milborne St Andrew photographed in the 1870s by Pouncey of Dorchester, perhaps because of interest in the village after the lock-out. Courtesy Dorset County Museum.

The disputes seem to have followed the same pattern in Milborne St Andrew and the adjoining Winterborne Whitchurch. The first strike took place in May, June and July 1872. A rise was conceded but in the autumn of 1872 many men were sacked and left their villages. A second strike with inconclusive results took place in March 1873. A third strike, seeking a three shilling rise, was launched in April 1874 and this resulted in lockouts and evictions. In May 1872, right at the start of the Union, the *Bridport News* reprinted an article from one of 'the London journals' about the Dorsetshire labourers which focused on Piddletown and Milborne St Andrew. The account was not very respectful to Mansel-Pleydell:

Mansell practises paternal government on a minute scale in the hamlet of Milborne St Andrew. He has introduced most of the improvements eulogised by Mr. Disraeli, with the exception of model cottages, which are still wanting. One can understand his feeling a Conservative tenderness for the whitewashed mud-walls and the moss-grown thatch placed there by his ancestors. They are a poetic feature in the landscape over which he presides; and if addicted to inflicting rheumatism or ague on unpoetic tenants, these are physical conditions which a Dorset man expects to present themselves as naturally as his eye teeth. Milborne cottages do occasionally succumb to old age and get pulled down, but no other form of innovation is permitted amongst them. I could not meet with any one able to determine how many years it was since the youngest of them was built. It was much easier to trace a universal consciousness of the great need there was for a dozen or two more. Building will be

an indifferent investment, however, at the current rentals, which average only a shilling a week. Milborne housekeeping is sensibly ameliorated by the squire's leniency as a landlord, but his kindness is flavoured with eccentricity. In respect of garden allotments, the village is under a sumptuary law, which restricts holders to about five perches per head of their families. They have the consolation of paying a peppercorn rental of twopence per perch per annum; but the earth-hunger gnaws at their hearts. They actually covet not only more cottages, but more garden ground. It is a long stride for their imaginations from their own limited cabbage beds to the thousand-acre farms on which they have to labour for the good of other men's pockets. Not that the farmers of the parish are anything else than gentlemen whom it should be a pleasure and an honour to work for. They are, it is true, lukewarm as to the ancient customs of 'gristing' and potatoe ground; but they have dropped readily into the groove of modern philanthropy. They support a very fair school, and some time ago they helped to establish a village reading-room, whereby hangs a tale. In this room Hodge's study of Conservative politics as taught by the local press was tempered with glimpses of less fossilised journals, which had been unwittingly subscribed for by his patrons. Treason penetrated into the camp. Last Saturday night the labourers met in this very reading-room, and concocted a disloyal manifesto against their benevolent employers. It was expressed in the form of an intimation that, after the 27th of April, 'We, the undersigned, would one and all decline to work any longer for less than two shilling per day of nine hours'. An identical note was addressed to each farmer in the parish, bearing the signatures of all the men in his employment. One of the signatories was deputed to deliver the ultimatum, which was done accordingly on Monday morning.

This *coup* is not likely to succeed so well as it deserves, for during the week some of the men grew nervous, and withdrew their names. The masters believe that there is plenty of labour to be purchased at the present price, and some of them argue that it would be bad for the men themselves to increase it. Their inducement to remain in Dorset would be strengthened, and that, according to the farmers, is the root of all the evil. If the surplus labour of the county would have sense enough to transfer itself to another market, the remainder could be better paid in consequence, were they only to get what was saved in poor rates. Under the ruling system of cultivation Dorset needs only machinery and game-keepers. It is never without men seeking work, and some who have once escaped from it are infatuated enough to return.

This has more detail than the newspapers about the start of the demands in the village: using the reading room provided by the squire for the meeting to formalise their demands is a nice touch. It also shows that the Milborne men were well organised, although some wavered.⁴⁶

Milborne's precocious adherence to the Union is evidenced on a number of occasions. Martin spoke at a large union rally in Somerset in early June 1872 and gave the crowd 'particulars of a strike which occurred a few weeks ago' for 'an advance from 9s.-12s. per week, and said that when on strike assistance was sent to them by gentlemen in London, Mr Potter forwarding £20'. Two union delegates sent from Warwickshire had already formed four Union

⁴⁶ *Bridport News*, 3 May 1872.



FIGURE 3. The eastern end of Milborne St Andrew in the 1870s by Pouncey of Dorchester. The large brick houses (right) contrast with the thatched cottages. Courtesy Dorset County Museum.

branches in the area 'and there were already 230 or 240 members'.⁴⁷ Joseph Arch, speaking at a labourers' meeting in Blandford in late July said 'This Union was first started in Warwickshire, and we got application from this county for assistance. It was from Alfred Martin, telling us that some of them at Milborne were on strike, and asking for help, and it was at once proposed to send down £20' and two delegates. The same issue of the newspaper reported that a labourers' meeting had been held that week in Milborne St Andrew, with 3,000 people present. Alfred Martin was quoted late in July as saying 'We began this movement at Milborne'.⁴⁸

At one of the early labourers' meetings at Winterborne Kingston in June 1872 'a vote of thanks was accorded to Mr Standfield of Milborne' and two other farmers 'for the liberal manner they had met the men'. Mr Ricketts, a local union man said 'Mr Standfield had given his men 2s. a day, but the men did not feel satisfied with it, as they wanted something to drink in haymaking; they told their master, and he said, "Well, I will give 10s. for the hay harvest extras"'. Milborne St Andrew was mentioned at a labourers' meeting in Fordington in early July 1872. 'A poor man at Milborne was receiving 8s. a week and asked for a rise. The master said he could not give more, and added "Do you know what you get?" ... and told him he had

⁴⁷ *The Times*, 7 June 1872.

⁴⁸ *WT*, 27 July, 3 Aug. 1872.



FIGURE 4. Thatched cottages at Milborne St Andrew in the 1870s, by Pouncy of Dorchester.
Courtesy Dorset County Museum.

a house worth 2s. a week, and gristing worth 6s. 6*d.* a bushel for 5s., but the man said often they could not eat it, and had to go to the baker for more'.⁴⁹

The outcome of the dispute at Milborne was referred to by Mr Smith, Union leader for the area in September 1872:

As an example of the pressure put upon men who had joined the union, Mr Smith said ... they would remember that some time ago Mr Robert Fowler, of Milborne St Andrew [*recte* Winterborne Whitchurch], boasted that he gave his men 17s. a week. Now, since then, he had come down to 12s; and some of the men, because they had joined the union, he had discharged. Some of these men could actually boast of forty and twenty years' service, and because they had followed the example of their masters, in combining together, they were turned adrift.⁵⁰

A labourers' meeting at Blandford two weeks later was told how 'The farmers at Milborne St Andrew, Whitchurch, Kingston etc., are discharging men that are in the Union and are in many cases treating them very unfairly'.⁵¹

Nothing further describes events at Milborne until late March 1873 when we are told, at the beginning of the inconclusive labour unrest of that year:

Milborne St Andrew: a branch committee meeting was held here on the 12th instant, when it was proposed, seconded, and carried unanimously, 'that all able-bodied members inform

⁴⁹ WT, 29 June, 6 July 1872. In this context, gristing probably means unground corn: the labourer would have had to have it ground into flour.

⁵⁰ WT, 21 Sept. 1872. Robert Fowler was actually a farmer in the adjacent parish of Winterborne

Whitchurch – the speaker must have muddled the two parishes – Joseph Fowler was the main farmer at Milborne.

⁵¹ WT, 28 Sept. 1872.

their masters that on and after the first week in April they will require a rise in their wages of 2s. per week, and older members in proportion; a week's work to consist of fifty-four hours'.⁵²

Whether any of these demands was secured is unrecorded, but it seems unlikely.

The start of the 1874 dispute is reported very clearly:

STRIKE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS AT MILBORNE ST ANDREW

On Saturday, April 4, the labourers employed on the farms of Mr Groves, Mr Standfield, and Mr. Fowler, gave the usual week's notice, that, unless their wages were advanced three shillings per week, they should turn out on the following Saturday. On the Monday morning, Mr. Fowler, on seven of his men going on as usual to work, sent them home again, telling them they would not be wanted any more; most of these were married men, and regular hands. The following Saturday, the demand not being acceded to, on the expiration of the notice the labourers, to the number of between 30 and 40, turned out on strike. The shepherds and carters are still in work, as they receive perquisites in addition to the 12s. per week, and another thing they could not leave their places without breaking the terms of their agreement. Out of the 12s. per week received by the other labourers they had to pay for house rent, fuel, &c. We are glad to hear that no disturbance has taken place; on the contrary the utmost quietness prevails, the men having unanimously resolved not to enter a public house whilst they are out of work, under a penalty of 6d., the fines, if any, to go towards the funds of the general lock-out in the eastern counties.⁵³

The three farmers named covered most of the parish, with only one large farmer named in the 1871 census omitted. On 24 April it was reported that the strike continued, 'both parties showing a strong determination to hold out to the end'.⁵⁴

Most of the farm labourers in the village seem to have been on strike – it was called a general strike, and this was given as the reason why so many people were there to witness the evictions (Figures 1, 6). A letter in the *Weymouth Telegram* on 8 May 1874,⁵⁵ states that the strike is 'confined to the south side of the turnpike road' but this was challenged in a letter to the *Weymouth Telegram* the next week signed 'One of those on Strike'. 'One of the farms where the men have struck is not situate on the south side; and, in addition, some of the labourers do not live on the south side'. This does not sound like a complete general strike: his words suggest that some labourers were at work. Another letter of 29 May 1874 states that about thirty men were on strike, but this was after the evictions of late April when some men had gone back to work, and others had left the village.

'Looker On' was told 'by a respectable person' that the strike

it is continued to small limits, that no more men shall be on the Union funds than can be easily paid, but this I was told has only been partially done ... [a person who knew about the Union told him], 'You see, sir, it was thought the farmers here would soon give way and pay

⁵² WT, 28 Mar. 1873.

⁵³ WT, 17 Apr. 1873.

⁵⁴ WT, 24 Apr. 1873.

⁵⁵ Also printed in *Dorset County Chronicle*, 7 May 1874 (where it is the first mention of the strike in that newspaper).

the demand for 15s. per week, and until then the men in union in the adjoining parishes, Bere Regis, Dewlish, Milton Abbas, &c, had agreed to a levy of 6d. per week each to keep those on strike, and as soon as Milborne farmers had been driven to give way, the same demand was to be extended to these parishes; this was to last until the busy season of hay-making had arrived, when a further demand of another three shillings a week was to be made'. How far this information is correct I do not know, but it was given me by a respectable person, and I give it you for what it is worth.⁵⁶

At a labourers' meeting in Blandford in late July 1872 Mr Barnett, stated 'I represent the Stickland branch. We are 150 strong, that is including [Winterborne] Houghton'. These parishes are just to the north of Milborne, with Milton Abbas between Stickland and Milborne. This, and a statement in early June of 230 or 240 members in four union branches in the area are the only membership figures discovered.⁵⁷

It is difficult to establish exactly what wages the labourers were receiving, because of the complications of perquisites, cheap rent etc. Cottages are considered below, but other perquisites included extra pay for harvest etc., and sometimes fuel, allotments or even corn for bread. Even at the time, earnings were a matter of dispute in the columns of the *Weymouth Telegram*. The Milborne men were demanding 15s. a week, and they stated that they were currently earning 12s. a week. The farmers claimed (as did the letter-writer of 8 May) that it was 12s. a week plus perquisites. 'One of those on strike' replied on 15 May. 'The men, I say, did not have perquisites, and as to having the advantage of piece work, the only time I can remember was when a job was offered us at such a price as would have rendered it impossible for us to have earned so much as 12s. per week'. The report of the start of the strike clearly says the labourers had 12s. a week but paid rent etc. out of that. The later letters all seem to accept that the men were receiving 12s. a week, and in early June it was reported that Mansel-Pleydell's agent was then offering 13s. a week.⁵⁸

The three labourers who were evicted lived in cottages belonging to the farmer, himself a tenant. The labourers paid him rent, although some of the hostile letters to the newspapers claimed they did not. Again, the question of how much rent the labourers paid was disputed and resulted in a debate in the letters columns of the *Telegram*. 'One of those on strike' wrote 'If these families paid no rent, how came it to pass that 1s. weekly was kept back from their 12s. wages to pay the rent? This was done, and if this is paying no rent, I know not what else to call it'. 'Justice and Common Sense' was clear: the strikers though themselves hardly dealt with because of their evictions. 'They might as well think they ought to receive their wages in full, as that they ought not to be deprived of their cottages. For, are not the cottages, and the use of the cottages, given as part of their weekly wages? And why should they expect to be allowed to retain that which is equal to one or two shillings a week, and yet refused to give anything in return?' (Tempting to answer, because they have paid the rent, but no-one did reply in that way). 'Another Looker On' did reply 'Is it right that a landowner should turn a man out of his home because he refuses to work for 12s. a week? I think it would be equally right to say to a farmer

⁵⁶ WT, 5 June 1874.

⁵⁸ WT, 8 June 1874.

⁵⁷ WT, 13 July 1874; *The Times*, 7 June 1874.

if you don't pay your men a pound a week, I will eject you from your farm ... the forcing of the men to work for one master is like forcing a farmer to sell his corn to one miller'.⁵⁹

A letter from 'Looker On' added a further complication about cottages. Someone who had been 'advising' and supporting the striking labourers

owns cottages there [Milborne St Andrew] and at Kingston and Whitchurch. These are of a very poor description with little garden and accommodations; for these a rent of from 7s. 6d. to 8s. 6d. per month is charged, quite double that for cottages belonging to land-owners and farmers, proving the owner to be quite awake to commercial principles when his own pocket is concerned.

No cottages were currently being built, as they do not pay unless part of an estate, nor will until 'a system of charging their full value is established. This cannot be less than 5s. per week for the cottages required, costing at least £200 each for land and building, to which must be added, insurance, repairs, and rates'.

John Smith, the small landlord concerned, replied in a letter published by the *Weymouth Telegram* the following week:

I beg to say my cottages are let at £4 4s. per year, which amounts to about 1s. 7¼d. per week, and I can easily find tenants, as men know if they pay their rent they are sure of a home, and are not subject to be ejected if they do not work for a particular farmer, or if they decline to work for low wages. I am not aware that I am the owner of cottages in Whitechurch and Milton; perhaps a 'Looker On' will kindly inform me where they are, as I should be glad to call for the rent. After saying I charge the poor excessive rent, the 'Looker On' says – 'The building of cottages does not pay except as an accommodation for labourers required on the estates, nor will it until a system of charging their full value is established; this cannot be less than 5s. per week'. So Mr 'Looker On', you tell me if I charge my tenants 1s. 7¼d. per week, it is too much: and then you say the full value of a cottage is 5s. a week. Pray explain your inconsistency. The fact is the labourer will never have a good and comfortable cottage until he is enabled to pay a higher rent and to enable him to pay a higher rent, he must have increased wages. Why should I let my cottages at less than their value to enable a farmer to pay low wages, assisted by relief from the poor-rates?⁶⁰

These rents all seem on the low side. The Royal Commission of 1868 found 2s. a week to be the usual rent although some landowners let them direct at 1s. a week, as Mansel-Pleydell did at

⁵⁹ WT, 15, 29 May, 5 June 1874.

⁶⁰ WT, 5 June, 12 June 1874. Smith also wrote in support of the union: 'I believe the Labourer's Union to be a necessity, and I will advocate the rights of the labourer fearless of the frowns of the rich and powerful. I only ask that he should be paid a sufficient sum to enable him to have some of the comforts of life in return for his labour; and I seek to injure no man; but when I see farmers, whose immediate ancestors were petty tradesmen, now keeping their carriage and pair

of horses, with a livery servant stuck up behind them, and when I know these luxuries have been wrung from the poor by low wages, and when I know low wages mean women and children with aching foodless stomachs, and boots without soles, and that the labourer has nothing to look forward to but the Union workhouse in his old age and to being buried in a parish coffin, I think it is time he demanded the franchise and a sufficient remuneration for his labour'. (WT, 12 June 1874).

Milborne St Andrew (see below). Most of the cottages in Milborne were old and this may have been reflected in their rent.⁶¹

One of the Union's general demands was for land for the labourers, and the Milborne St Andrew men were keen supporters of that. They concluded their letter to the *Telegram*, 'Wish we had [the land], there shoulde[n] be any lack of bread about the loaf'. Difficult syntax, but presumably meaning bigger better loaves. The London newspaper account of 1872 cited previously mentions disputes over the amount of potato ground allotted to labourers in Milborne St Andrew.

Milborne St Andrew was only a tiny part of the strike and lock-out of the Summer of 1874: the main dispute was in East Anglia. Nor were the evictions which took place there the only ones in Dorset. There had been at least two lots of evictions earlier at Affpuddle and Moreton and also at Pallington near Dorchester in 1872 and possibly at Owermoigne,⁶² but Milborne St Andrew is remembered because the Union arranged for photographs to be taken of the three evictions (Figs 1, 5 and 6). These were reproduced and distributed by the Union. Joseph Fowler was quick to meet striking labourers with eviction. In late April:

Two farm labourers who had been in the employ of Mr. Fowler, and who were occupying cottages belonging to him for which they paid rent, were forcibly ejected; and their goods and chattels put into the road. As there is a general strike of labourers in the village there was a good muster of men, women, and children, attracted thither by the 'novel and interesting' spectacle. Many were the exclamations of disapprobation at the way in which the little property the poor people possessed was being thrown out, and many uncomplimentary epithets were applied to those so employed. It may be inferred that a breach of the peace was expected as Superintendent Underwood and the local police were present, but there was no disturbance, the men who were looking on adhering strictly to the instructions from the Union officials to commit no breach of the peace, even though there might be great provocation. The poor people's goods were packed up by the roadside, and two others received notice that they would be evicted in a similar manner on the following morning, but, from some reason or other, only one of those was turned out, making three families in all who have been summarily ejected. One of those who have been ejected is on his way to the north of England, but another it is said became penitent, was forgiven, and would probably return to his master on Monday morning. The third still remains by the roadside, a warning to others of the summary punishment they may expect from their employers if they demand an advance of wages. A rather laughable incident occurred to one of those employed in removing the furniture from one of the labourers' cottages. It appears that an article of property (it cannot,

⁶¹ Stanhope, 'Report', p. 5; *Bridport News*, 15 May 1874 (see above, pp. 57–8).

⁶² *WT*, 21 Sept. 1872. The *WT* reported on 17 Aug. 1873 a collection at a labourers' meeting at Briantspuddle 'on behalf of three families, whom the steward of H. Frampton, Esq., had turned out of doors, and whose things were still on the side of the turnpike road'. James Frampton of Frampton, prosecutor of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in

1834 died in 1855: this is his son Henry keep-ing up the tradition. A labourer at Pallington, near Dorchester asked for a rise from 8s. in August 1872 and was told by the farmer "I will see you – first". Two days subsequently the man's goods were bundled out of the cottage, and put by the side of the road, the farmer ordering and witnessing the ejection of the women and children during the heavy rain', *WT*, 17 Aug. 1872.

strictly speaking, be called furniture), was in the room wrapped in a cloth, which a son of Mr. Fowler took from his hands to carry out, when something dropped through a hole in the bottom and there immediately rose some hundreds of small insects which by their buzzing and the peculiar stinging sensation they caused about the face and head, were soon discovered to be a swarm of bees!! Thinking discretion the better part of valour, the young farmer dropped the hive and beat a hasty retreat from the room, the door of which, fortunately for him, was open, and through which they bystanders observed the bees pouring like smoke! No doubt removing labourers furniture at Milborne will long be remembered by him.⁶³

Henry Mayor,⁶⁴ the district Union secretary reported in a letter in the same issue of the newspaper:

A farmer and three sons have been engaged putting the goods out of doors; but in the midst of all the families behaved well. One of the men stood in his doorway singing the Union songs while his goods, wife, and children were turned into the street, force being used with the wife who had a sick baby, and was anxious to keep it under shelter, but was not permitted to do so. Medical advice was obtained to see if the exposure would be likely to prove fatal with the disease the child was suffering from. Another man turned out employed himself in playing some lively tunes on his fiddle in his house. A part of the man's property appears to have been a stock of bees, which was not very easy to eject, but appeared more than a match for those who entered. All possible schemes are used to get the men to return. The employer goes into the cottages and advises the men to return to work at the old rate of wages, and uses ... and ... language against the leaders of the Union. The men are now moving off to other fields of labour.⁶⁵

The swarm of bees sounds like a plant, and the Union made much of the poor sick child. All the newspapers make it clear that the men had paid their rent. A later letter from Henry Mayor explained the taking of the photographs:

When I was on my way to witness these scenes, I felt determined to get them shown up to the world, and I, without hesitation, took with me a photographic artist, to get a view of these never-to-be-forgotten acts of oppression, and I am doing all I can to spread them the world over, so that in times to come, as well as the present, these diabolical acts of cruelty, which were practised on the poor labourers and their families, by professing Christians in the year 1874, may not only remain in word to be read in English history, but that the scenes themselves may be handed down, if time should last, in the ages to come.⁶⁶

He succeeded: these photographs are used in every book on the labourers and trades union history.

The Union had a great many of these photographs printed and distributed with a caption as

⁶³ WT, 1 May 1874.

⁶⁴ Henry Mayor of Blandford occasionally becomes the Mayor of Blandford as in *The Times*, 27 July 1872.

⁶⁵ WT, 1 May 1874.

⁶⁶ WT, 18 June 1874.

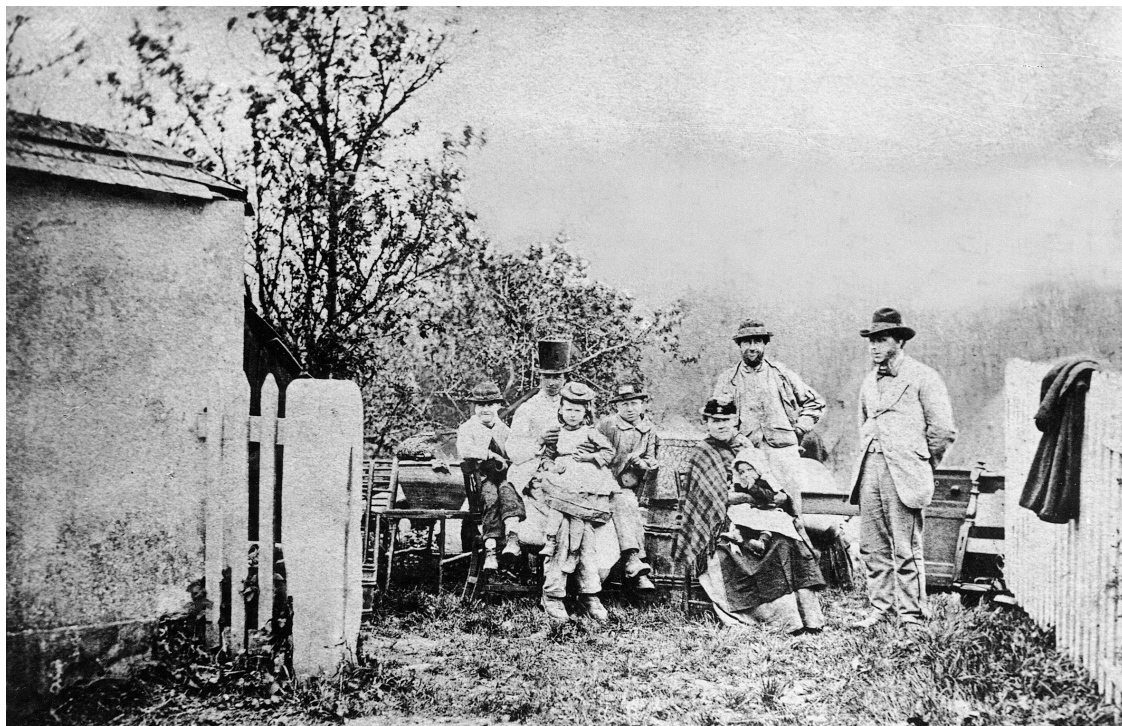


FIGURE 5. The eviction at Milborne St Andrew, April 1874. Two families were evicted; possibly the men on the right are the labourers and the woman one of their wives. The man with the tall hat could be Mr Mayor, the Union official who organised the taking of the photographs. His clothes and (especially) the hat are unlike those of the men in Figure 1. The people are sitting with the furniture from the houses about them.
 Courtesy Dorset County Museum.

in Figure 1: there must have been a great many of them as quite a few survive. When Groves was writing his history of the agricultural trade unions (published in 1948), he found that

in many a Dorset cottage the visitor will come across a faded photograph of an eviction of the great lockout: the labourer and his family gathered outside the cottage that was once their home, around them their few pieces of furniture, their shabby ragged bundles of clothing and bedding, a picture or two; their whole world pitched out into the roadway.⁶⁷

The direct method of eviction seems to have been legal: at least the police were present when the Fowlers threw their labourers out of their cottages. Mansel-Pleydell took a more formally legal route. He applied to Blandford County Court in mid-May for permission to eject labourers. Six labourers objected and the *Bridport News* reported that Reuben Sergeant

with others had been occupiers of cottages at Milborne on Mr Mansel's estate. Several of the cottages were given into the hands of the farmers, but others Mr. Mansel had held in his own hands, charging the occupiers 1s. per week rent. The regular notices to quit had been served

⁶⁷ Reg Groves, *Sharpen the sickle. The history of the Farm Workers' Union* (1949), p. 74.



FIGURE 6. A further version of Figure 1, showing an elder man wearing a smock on the left, who has been cropped from the mass-produced version of the picture. Courtesy Dorset County Museum.

on the parties, and everything had been done legally – Defendant said he considered he was entitled to a quarter's notice, as he had paid quarterly, and on being asked if he had his receipts stated that he had left them at home. Counterfoils, however, were produced by Mr. Robert Galton, which showed that the cottages were let from week to week, and Mr. Galton stated that though he had never given notice to any before, he should have given a week's notice. His Honour explained to defendant and his companions that though the rents might have been collected quarterly that did not prove a quarterly letting, but was only done for the sake of convenience. In reply to His Honour, Mr. Atkinson said the men belonged to the Labourers' Union and had struck for higher wages. Defendant said he would go back and work for the farmer if he would pay him what he asked, and seemed to think it very hard that he should be called upon to give up possession. Mr. Atkinson said that as they did not wish to show anything like unkindness or harshness they were willing to give three weeks for the defendant to remove, and this His Honour confirmed, expressing a hope that in the meantime an arrangement would be made between their employer and the men.⁶⁸

Mansel-Pleydell did not evict any of these labourers: possibly the publicity given to the earlier evictions discouraged him, or perhaps he thought the Union was nearly defeated. On 8 June

⁶⁸ *Bridport News*, 15 May 1874.

1874 the *Weymouth Telegram* reported that ‘the men on strike here [Milborne St Andrew] were visited by the agent of Mr. J. C. Mansel-Pleydell, the owner of the estate, who informed them that if they were willing to work for 13s. per week – and the farmers would hire them at that price – they were at liberty to get employment where they could, and should not be ejected from their houses’. This is a complete turn-around from mid-May when Mansel-Pleydell was applying for permission to evict.⁶⁹ When they returned to work is not clear. One immediate cost, which some may have felt just, was that on 5 June, Joseph Fowler, forced to thresh a wheat rick with the aid of his sons, his labourers being on strike, had his clothes pulled into the engine. His arm was broken and he suffered severe bruising.⁷⁰

The men evicted are not named in the newspapers, and only eight of the striker’s names are known with certainty. They are listed in Table 2. George Chaffey, John Brown and Henry Derrick wrote a letter to the newspaper which started, ‘We, the labourers on strike at Milborne St Andrew’. They were challenged by a letter from ‘Looker On’. He made enquiries about the man ‘one is a tradesman, not a farm labourer at all, “woodman, thatcher etc” renting a little land himself; another a gardener, rabbit trapper etc, working on the farm occasionally; the other not working at all for the person he calls his late master’.⁷¹ This must be Joseph Fowler (see below). Henry Derrick is on the 1871 census for Milborne St Andrew as woodman & thatcher, and the description in the letter in inverted commas is exactly that, suggesting the census had been consulted. John Brown is listed as a Farm Labourer, and George Chaffey is not in the census.

Five more names are known because they are the cottagers summonsed to Blandford County Court to be evicted. John Brown both signed the letter and was summonsed, but Reuben Sergeant, Thomas Stickley, John Randall and James Stickley are new names. All are in the 1871 census as labourers, but James Stickley and Reuben Sergeant lived in Milborne St Andrew, the south-eastern part of Milborne St Andrew parish. Reuben Sergeant was the main defendant at court, which seems strange as the only person of that name was only 13 at the 1871 census, and so can only have been sixteen or so in 1874.

Who was leading the 1874 strike is unknown. Alfred Martin is named as the leader of the Milborne St Andrew strike in the Union history:⁷² he is not mentioned by the newspapers during the 1874 strike and lock-out. Martin spoke at several labourer’s meetings in Dorset in 1872 and at Winterborne Kingston, an adjacent parish in late July 1872, he was reported as saying:

My fellow working men, stick to union. If you do you may depend it will stick to you. If you do, do not be afraid to go to your masters respectfully, and if he will not give you what you ought to have go somewhere else where you can get it. (Hear, hear.) We began this movement at Milborne, we had no one to direct us, but you have had your eyes open, and you know now how to proceed. (Hear, hear.) How about the pig? I hear that they are going to run for him to-night, but I hope no union man will catch him. (No, no.) I do not think many union men are there. (No, no.) Now, my lads, keep away from drink, it is ten years ago since

⁶⁹ WT, 8 June 1874.

⁷⁰ The report says ‘John’ but Joseph must be meant. *Bridport News*, 12 June 1874. The accident happened on Friday last, so 5 June. Fowler survived to commit suicide

in September 1879 (*Bridport News*, 19 Sept. 1879).

⁷¹ WT, 15 May, 5 June 1874.

⁷² Groves, *Sharpen the sickle*, p. 61.

TABLE 2. Known union members in Milborne St Andrew, 1872–4

	<i>Signed letter, 15 May 1874</i>	<i>Summonsed for cottage, 1874</i>	<i>Other evidence</i>	<i>1871 Census</i>					<i>1881 census resident at MSA</i>
				<i>age</i>	<i>occupation</i>	<i>Place of birth</i>	<i>Place of residence</i>	<i>children at home</i>	
John Brown	Y	Y		42	Farm Lab.	MSA	MSA	3	Ag. Lab.
[...] Burt or Butt			Y						
George Chaffey	Y								
Henry Derrick	Y			39	Woodman and thatcher	MSA	MSA	4	Woodman and thatcher
Alfred Martin			Y	49	Farm Lab.	MSA	MS	1	
George Randall		Y		51	Farm Lab.	MSA	MSA	1	Farm Lab.
Reuben Sergent		Y		13	Farm Lab.	MSA	MS		Ag Lab.
James Stickley		Y		39	Farm Lab.	MSA	MS	3	Ag Lab.
James Stickley				66	Farm Lab.	MSA	MS	0	Ag Lab.
Thomas Stickley		Y		55	Farm Lab.	MSA	MSA	2	Ag Lab.

Key: MSA, Milborne St Andrew; MS, Milborne Stileham.

Sources: as text, 1871 census, 1881 census enumerators' books.

Note: The census does not give Milborne Stileham as a birthplace but only the parish of Milborne St Andrew. It is not possible to say with certainty which of the two James Stickleys was evicted.

I took the pledge, and I have never regretted it yet. My wife is always sure that I shall bring home my money. You men take my advice and stick to the union. (Hear, hear and cheers).

The pig references are a puzzle – nothing else in the newspapers refers to it.⁷³ Martin was typical of Union organisers in being teetotal. He does not appear at any of the many meetings reported after late July, and is not mentioned with any of the subsequent disputes: presumably he was amongst those who left the area in the aftermath of the 1872 strikes. He cannot be located in the 1881 census: perhaps he too migrated.

IV

Reports of the dispute peter out in the newspapers, but in August a further letter from ‘Nunquam Dormio’ summarised the end of the dispute.

As to the strike at Milborne, the men were out nearly or quite three months, during which time they were paid about one hundred and thirty pounds as relief. Their union pay was not stopped (though probably it would not have continued much longer) as the men went to work of their own accord. The fact is, owing to the favourable season and the increased use of machinery, the farmers were enabled to farm their land in a slovenly manner with the aid of a few old men and boys who did not belong to the Union. That the Union has received a heavy blow cannot be denied, but I cannot see how the farmers can say they have gained a victory. It is probable the Union may recover, and become stronger than before. If the farmers should take advantage of the men by lowering their wages after harvest, the effect will be that many men who now do not belong to the Union will join. What the agricultural labourers required was to be shaken up, and they have been shaken up most effectually. They had had their first great battle with their masters, and they have not been utterly beaten.

The very next letter in the newspaper is from ‘A Dorsetshire Labourer’ asking for the truth about Canada, as he will emigrate if he can do better there than he does in England.⁷⁴

Robert Fowler, who had first paid more and then opposed the Union, was accused when he was a candidate in the 1876 by-election of having used ‘an agent of the old Labourers’ Union’ as a canvasser.

He [Fowler] would ask was there anyone in the whole county of Dorset who believed that. It was a disgraceful lie. There was no man who had put his foot firmer on the movement than he had done ... they had been the cause of hundred and thousands of labouring men leaving the county, and many of them to suffer starvation and misery ... he had always given his men good wages and he did so still: he had not altered them on this demand.⁷⁵

⁷³ WT, 3 Aug. 1872.

⁷⁴ WT, 7 Aug. 1874.

⁷⁵ *Dorset County Chronicle*, 3 Feb. 1876. It was the ‘old labourers union’ because of splits from the original: there was, by 1876, a ‘new’ union. Astonishingly though Fowler

did have support from a union man at one of his election meetings. John Curgenvin, curate of Lyme Regis, wrote to the *Dorset County Chronicle* (27 Jan. 1876) complaining that ‘Mr. J. Mitchell, a well known extreme radical and abuser of existing institutions’ had addressed

V

In its public face, the Union had something of the quality of a religious revival. During the Milborne evictions 'one of the men [being evicted] stood in his doorway singing Union songs'. About a week afterwards the Union organised a service at the cross roads in Milborne St Andrew, and 'a considerable number of people chiefly of the labouring class of this and the adjoining parishes' gathered to hear a Labourers' Union delegate preach. 'The proceedings were of the most orderly character. The singing of a couple of favourite hymns, accompanied by an harmonium and flute, was heartily joined in by young and old'. The preacher said that Joseph Arch 'had been called of God to the great work in which he is now engaged' and that sometimes Union members were called upon to suffer 'even as those poor families were whose home is under the hedge today'.⁷⁶ The Union was also careful to seize the Christian high ground. Joseph Arch was a dissenting preacher, and many of the local union officials shared his background. At a labourers' meeting in Fordington in 1872 a union official is reported as saying 'We have found it desirable to get Christian men and teetotallers as officers'.⁷⁷ The 70 delegates drawn from all over England who met at the National Union 'conference' in June 1874 were observed by a reporter from *The Times* who thought that most were agricultural labourers 'and a large proportion of them were local preachers amongst the Primitive Methodists'.⁷⁸ The Christian credentials of those who opposed the Union were sometimes questioned: the behaviour of farmers was denounced as unchristian.

The meetings also have the flavour of political meetings – 'A Looker On' complained 'The leaders of their Union hold meetings with music, flags etc., singing Union songs and wearing their colours'. Disconcertingly the Union colour was blue, nowadays the colour associated with Conservatives. At a meeting at Winterborne Kingston in August 1872 some of the labourers were 'wearing rosettes of ribbon, others with the word "Union" in front of their hats'. At the unionised Dorchester Candlemas Fair in February 1873 'many of the lads displayed a bit of blue ribbon in their hats as a token that they were Unionists'.⁷⁹ Even the smaller meetings had overtones of elections or celebrations: at Chesilborne in May 1873 'a procession was formed, headed by the Milton Abbas brass band, and some of the men carried garlands'. Five hundred labourers were present.⁸⁰

When the Union portrayed itself as a Christian movement, and drew many of its forms from the church, and especially the nonconformist churches, what was the attitude of the Dorset clergy to these disputes between their parishioners? Many of the local Union officials, and probably many of the members too, were non-conformist teetotallers and regarded the Church of

Fowler's meeting at Lyme, 'accounted for his support of Mr Fowler as being the less of two evils' and attacked tithes. Curgenven was outraged because Fowler 'allowed him to speak and appealed for an hearing for him when he was interrupted'. 'Mr Fowler said that he "called himself a Conservative and Mr Mitchell called himself a Radical, but there was not much difference in their opinions after all"' [emphasis in original]. Mitchell must be

George Mitchell who started the labourers' union in Somerset in June 1872, an extraordinary supporter for Fowler.

⁷⁶ WT, 1 May 1874.

⁷⁷ WT, 21 Sept. 1872

⁷⁸ *The Times*, 15 June 1874.

⁷⁹ WT, 8 May 1874, 3 Aug. 1872, 21 Feb. 1873.

⁸⁰ WT, 30 May 1873.

England clergy as part of the establishment, supporters of the farmers and landowners. Some clergy certainly preached the gospel of social conservatism.⁸¹ The General Secretary of the Union complained about the Dorset clergy who ‘acknowledging the wretched position of the labourer, hold aloof from the question, because, as they say, it would not be right for them to take sides with any party in secular or social questions; and yet how repeatedly do we find them dining, and in company with the employer class’. He was writing about the Blandford Agricultural Society Dinner, as was Henry Mayor, local secretary, who wrote ‘I cannot understand parsons being found at public-house dinners, and especially at this time of temperance reformation; I wonder they can face a public-house at all, much more sit down with the “jolly good fellows, so say all of us”’. The good Book says “Be not fond of wine-bibbers, for wine is a mocker”’.⁸²

One of the Union men said that parsons ‘rob, impoverish, and insult’ their parishioners. This brought C. P. Phinn, Rector of the Crichels into the correspondence columns of the *Telegram* saying ‘with all the avowed objects of the Agricultural Labourers’ Union I heartily agree. Increase of wage, improved dwellings, security of tenure, possession of a share of land, the franchise – to all these I believe our agricultural labourer have a right ... [and] I recognise in the fullest manner the right of all concerned *to unite* for these objects’. What he could not stand was ‘the frantic and sweeping abuse poured out on the clergy’. He thought the Union had ‘sectarian jealousy of the parsons as ministers of an Established Church’ and this led to the ‘rancour displayed against them’. He claimed that the *Labourers’ Union Chronicle* ‘often chuckles over reports of villages where men and lads were learning never to “pull the brink” or “touch their hats” to their minister’.⁸³

Attitudes hardened, and a national Union official at a big labourers’ meeting at Fordington in December was reported as saying:

A clergyman in Dorset a few months ago condemned paid agitators, but he said ‘the labourer was worthy of his hire’, and the majority of them were men who were the best of their class, and could earn good wages if the Union dropped to-morrow. And what were the clergy but paid agitators? – (laughter). They took the pay and then some went to sleep – (laughter). The clergy were paid by many who did not believe in them or their doctrines, but the Union delegates got their small stipends from the pence of those who approved their work. Not until the landlords and farmers had to pay towards their delegates, would those men be on the level of state-paid parsons – (laughter).⁸⁴

The exception among local clergy was the Rev. C. Kegan Paul, of Sturminster Newton, later the publisher and author. At the Dorchester Candlemas fair meeting Mr J. Cox, national union man said he ‘was very sorry the clergy had not rallied round them [the labourers]’. Only one he knew had come forward, and that was the Rev. Mr Paul of Sturminster who had assisted them with his might. Such men as he saved the Church of England. It was a noteworthy fact that whenever any measure had been brought forward to benefit the

⁸¹ Above p. 47 for an example.

⁸² *WT*, 19 Jan 1873.

⁸³ *WT*, 13 June 1873.

⁸⁴ *WT*, 19 Dec. 1873.

labouring classes, the clergy had opposed it'.⁸⁵ Kegan Paul remembered the dispute in his autobiography:

In 1872, Mr. Arch's movement for a higher rate of wages among the labourers reached Dorset, and he carried his agitation into our neighbourhood with the aid of the Hon. Auberon Herbert.⁸⁶ I threw myself into this movement with all my heart. Mr. Herbert and Mr. Arch spent some days with me, during which we visited many large meetings of labourers, and in spite of the opposition of farmers, squires, and clergy we had the satisfaction to know that we raised the rate of wages at least two shillings a week all round. The good that was then done has never been undone; although it is still extremely probable that a large number of comfortable clergy are even less persuaded of the right of the labourer to earn decent wage than they are of the necessity of keeping him from over-indulgence in strong drink, the end of the agitation will probably result in producing a yeoman class, *i.e.* men who own land and cultivate it themselves, for there seems no room for three to share the profits on land, and the middle-man must go.

The squire and the farmers were good souls in their way and after their lights, but they were narrow and bigoted in Tory opinions, and we never really got on well, with my strong views about the rights of the labourer, especially about his right to take his labour to the best market and to improve his condition when he could. The labourers were a decent, pleasant people in many ways, and the children were as a rule particularly engaging, and so were many of the young men. There was a good deal of drunkenness, but not more than usual in country parishes, and on the whole I was lucky in the people. They gave me hearty help in choir, they came well to church, and were always loyal and good to me. My heart will always warm to a Dorset peasant.⁸⁷

VI

In all the thousands of words published in Dorset about the 1872-4 dispute, women hardly figure except as the recipients of the men's wage packets and as mothers. They were lambasted at a meeting in June 1872 by a farmer who said 'The labourers wives wear as fine bonnets here [Winterborne Kingston] as the farmers' wives do' to which a voice replied 'If they do it is by sitting up day and night gloving; they do not get it out of the farmers'.⁸⁸

The 1871 census for Milborne St Andrew lists only three women as field workers, one as a stocking knitter and six as glovers, but women's work was often part-time and so not recorded in the census (Table 1). After mid-century there were fewer women labourers in agriculture. Robert Fowler, speaking to the Blandford Farmer's Club in 1860, said 'hundreds of women have now little to do but tale bearing, chit chat and tittle tattling' because button making had ceased and 'farm labour is become somewhat distasteful to many of them'. He hoped that a glover or stocking maker would set up in the area to give 'the females constant employment, adding to

⁸⁵ WT, 21 Feb. 1873.

⁸⁶ Auberon Herbert, 1838-1906, younger son of the Earl of Carnarvon and at this time Liberal MP for Nottingham. He espoused increasingly radical positions

including ones of a republican hue. See Oxford DNB *sub nomine*.

⁸⁷ C. Kegan Paul, *Memories* (1899), p. 345.

⁸⁸ WT, 22 June 1872.

their income and making them more useful members of society'. Clearly by 1871 glovers had taken his hint.⁸⁹

The 1867 Royal Commission report quoted the opinion of Mr H. Fooks, farmer of Winterborne Whitchurch:

We have more difficulty in getting the women to go. In other villages round many more go. In some cases I know farms where 10 or 11 women are employed ... If I was going to thresh with my steam engine I should go to my carter's wife, and tell her I want her for a day or two. We consider that they are liable for that sort of work. I don't much like women for it, because I have known three or four accidents about here from it.⁹⁰

In February 1873 the *Weymouth Telegram* reported that 'whereas it has been customary to pay women when working on the farm eight pence a day, a shilling is now in many cases given'. So women did benefit from at least the first year of union activity, although at less than half the rate of men – with no perquisites the full man's wage was probably 15s., women at six days a week 6s.⁹¹

At the National Union's 'conference' in June 1874 the admission of women as members was discussed. 'It appeared that in many branches they had already been admitted' and one delegate (from Worcester) stated 'We have found that women are the best of men, and that many a woman is worth three men' to the Union. The Dorsetshire delegate (never named) said that in his county they had a female delegate who would talk down any male delegate in existence. Despite this testimony, the conference voted against admitting women to the Union.⁹² In fact the Union in Dorset could be anti-women. At a big labourers' meeting in Blandford in October 1872, Mr Wedmore, local union secretary 'denounced the employment of females on farms, and said that they wanted their wives at home to rock the cradle and attend to household affairs (laughter)'. A union official in February 1873 said that one of the local papers reported that 'there were only a lot of women and children' at Union meetings, but this was false. Neither the newspaper or the Unions were valuing women.⁹³ Universal male suffrage was part of the Union's demand, but no-one sought votes for women.

VII

Was the Union a success? At the meeting of the Blandford Agricultural Society in December 1872, Lord Portman was quoted as saying that labourers had been paying 2 or 3 per cent of their wages 'into Union funds, and he would like to know what benefit he [the labourer] was likely to get from that'.⁹⁴ He was answered through the letters column of the *Weymouth Telegram* by the general secretary of the Union. 'The Hon. Mr Portman inquires "what benefit he (the labourer) thinks he's going to get from it (the labour union)". This is a somewhat difficult question I confess. I might, however, say what they have already got. Wherever we have been able to bring the influence of the Union to bear, the men's wages have advanced 1s., 2s., 3s. and 4s.

⁸⁹ *Dorset County Chronicle*, 5 Apr. 1860.

⁹⁰ Stanhope, 'Report ...', p. 17.

⁹¹ *WT*, 21 Feb. 1873.

⁹² *The Times*, 15 June 1874.

⁹³ *WT*, 19 Oct. 1872, 21 Feb. 1873.

⁹⁴ *WT*, 26 Dec. 1872.

per week'.⁹⁵ A Dorset farmer writing in the *Agricultural Gazette* in March 1874 admitted that wages had risen from 9s. to 12s.⁹⁶

In that Union activity in Dorset 1872-4 put up the wages of the agricultural labourer by perhaps 2-4s. a week, or between 22 per cent and 50 per cent as the wages had been 8-9s. a week, it may be considered a success. But the men did not get the 16s. they sought, or the limitation on working hours, and for a good number, the strikes and subsequent lockouts were the occasion for their migration from Dorset to employment elsewhere. Their places were doubtless taken by men without Union loyalties. We know little about tensions within the labourers, between those who supported the strike and those who did not, and those who remained and those who took the places of men who left with their families. Nor do we know how long the advances in wages lasted. Nationally, agricultural wages had returned to their pre-1872 levels by the end of the decade.⁹⁷

We may suspect though that it was never glad morning again. Nunquam Dormio recognised this: in a letter to the *Telegram*, he wrote 'One thing is certain as a consequence of the struggle, and that is, that never again will the agricultural labourer be satisfied with his past condition, nor will he ever again become the submissive slave he was in times past'.⁹⁸ The labourers had shown the power they could bring to bear on farmers and the latter had not feared to answer with dismissals, lockouts and evictions. The bitterness of the dispute led to suspicion between man and master and this may have been its longest lasting legacy. J. Floyer, MP said in April 1874, just before the Milborne evictions, 'wherever there are strikes and lock-outs they always end in some kind of compromise after both parties have suffered severely ... and then there are the unkindly feelings which must remain after the contest has ceased'.⁹⁹ How far the strike radicalised the labourers cannot really be established. A carter from Piddlehinton in June 1874 refused to 'remove some manure from one heap to another' ... His defence was that "it warn't his business to fill putts" (the two-wheeled tipping carts). He had a contract as a carter, a man who worked with horses on the farm, and he was being asked to do the work of a common labourer. The editorial in the *Weymouth Telegram* reflected 'We cannot ignore the fact that the new spirit of jealousy and suspicion is a growth contemporaneous with the Labourers' Union'.¹⁰⁰ Thomas Hardy put it more succinctly in 1883. 'Such ticklish relations [between farmers and labourers] are the natural result of generations of unfairness on one side, and on the other an increase of knowledge, which has been kindled into activity by the exertions of Mr Joseph Arch'.¹⁰¹

The breaking of the bond between the farmer and his men probably led to more mobility, with men changing their jobs yearly. This did happen before 1872: Mr Fookes, Blandford area farmer, complained in 1860 that 'there were a certain class of labourers that could not be happy unless they went to fair yearly to try and get a better place. One farmer, last fair, agreed with six-and-twenty labourers, and if so that number must have left their places'. Another farmer

⁹⁵ *WT*, 10 Jan. 1873.

⁹⁶ *WT*, 27 Mar. 1874.

⁹⁷ Boyer and Hatton, 'Did Joseph Arch raise agricultural wages?'.
⁹⁸ *WT*, 7 Aug. 1874.

⁹⁸ *WT*, 7 Aug. 1874.

⁹⁹ *WT*, 17 Apr. 1874.

¹⁰⁰ *WT*, 26 June 1874.

¹⁰¹ Hardy, 'Dorsetshire labourer', p. 264.

said the Dorchester Candlemas hiring fair had ‘sprung up within the last forty years’.¹⁰² An increase in mobility amongst the labourers may be indicated at Milborne St Andrew. In 1871 17 per cent had not been born in the village: in 1881 41 per cent (Table 1).

The pamphlet-writing, anti-unionist schoolmaster from Puddletown, Mr Collins, had written early in 1873:

Unionism is the foster parent of turbulence and democratic tyranny; it sets class against class, divides a nation into hostile camps, destroys social and military subordination, and brings about, in consequence, a strained and complicated tension in the affairs of a nation, of which civil war is the only cure – the miseries of which all will I think, agree, will heavily outweigh the benefit of a sudden rise in wages. Already the fruits of Unionism in England are manifold and grievous; recruiting is dying out; disquietude prevails among our military and naval forces; social war is already proclaimed, and every great institution which has accompanied and fostered England’s rise to greatness and prosperity, is either assailed or threatened with destruction. I will vary an old proverb a little, and make it embody the sum and substance of my faith in this matter – “United as a nation we stand; divided by Unions we fall”.¹⁰³

The strikes of 1872–4 shows how the Dorset labourer could agitate, organise, even hold his own in heckling competitions with farmers. Their struggle perhaps did nothing to inculcate sympathy for their position amongst those farmers who held that the destitution of the labourer was not the result of low wages, but the labourers’ fecklessness. ‘A Dorset Farmer’ writing in March 1874 absolved himself and his class from any responsibility for the labourers’ condition.

A Dorset man in hard work is usually in a state of chronic fuddle, and often quarrelsome. This drinking at the farm begets thirst, which is attempted to be allayed at the public-house or in the town. Few Dorset labourers consider it right to return from the towns without half a pint, which means as much as can be got. If it be asked if his family is better off? my answer must be, decidedly worse. I find the wife does not get more to keep house than she did; the rest is going in drink, unionism, and its consequent restlessness and excitement. Fancy a man getting 18s. and allowing his wife 7s. a week to keep herself and four children, and yet such a case came before the board last week, as the man on hurting himself immediately applied for “parish pay”. Judging from my own parish, I am decidedly of opinion that the men and women are deteriorating – they are less tidy, and their children less cared for than when wages were nominally 9s. a week. One reason for this, I fear, will soon show itself in a general apathy on the part of the farmer with regard to the labourer and his family, as the more pressure is put upon the farmer the less will he concern himself keeping men all the year, but will just pay them as he wants them; and more, I fear that it will introduce and extend the gang system. How far education may affect the future it will be hard to say, but I for one shall be rejoiced at higher wages, if these will lead to independence of drink, of poor-rates, of idleness.

¹⁰² *Dorset County Chronicle*, 5 Apr. 1860.

¹⁰³ *WT*, 24 Jan. 1873.

Even the poor state of the cottages was the labourers' fault:

I wish I could see cottages kept better; but the helplessness and want of order of the labouring class paralyse all efforts in this direction; e.g. children tear down plaster in houses and break about fences with impunity, and our poor are too helpless to stop a hole with a bit of mortar, or to whitewash and keep a place clean.¹⁰⁴

VIII

Union statistics show that the decline in membership in Dorset was less than elsewhere – from 2,300 members in 1874 to 1,100 in 1879. In some other counties, such as the Union heartland of Warwickshire, membership fell by three-quarters between 1874 to 1879. Nationally the fall was less than a half.¹⁰⁵

Enough of the Union survived in Dorset to hold a celebration of the forty-first anniversary of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in March 1875, when a presentation was made to James Hammett, the only Martyr still in England. One of the national Union men present 'referring to the evictions at Milborne last year, said the Unionists should have let those cottages stand empty until Farmer Fowler and Mr Mansel-Pleydell had agreed not to discharge Unionists'. The address presented to Hammett referred to 'the days of oppression' which were not yet over. 'The merciless evictions for the crime of Unionism on the estates of Mr J. C. Mansell-Pleydell, Sir Richard Glyn, and others show the same cruel spirit of violent intolerance towards their humbler neighbours yet lives in our midst'.¹⁰⁶

In May 1912 the memorial arch to the Tolpuddle Martyrs was unveiled. The then vicar of Milborne St Andrew was present, exhibiting 'photos of the eviction scenes at Milborne St Andrew in 1874, when men are said to have been evicted for joining the Agricultural Labourers' Union. A baby-in-arms in one photo was stated to have grown to manhood and to be present today'. He would have been nearly 40. A bitter struggle had become a matter of quaint recollection.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ *WT*, 27 Mar. 1874.

¹⁰⁵ Dunbabin, 'Incidence of organisation', pp. 115-8.

¹⁰⁶ *WT*, 19 Mar. 1875.

¹⁰⁷ *Dorset County Chronicle*, 30 May 1912.