‘West Country Scum’: National Politics, Local Ritual and Space in the English South West, c.1820-1832.

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ABSTRACT: Rural electoral culture and protests have often been considered as merely ‘carnivalesque’ products of an ‘inward facing’ populace. In counties such as Somerset and Dorset an obsession with regional identities, rituals and spaces has often been accused of limiting the people’s political horizons. This article, conversely, will argue that rural politicians, electors and the popular crowd used regional concerns, rituals and identities to involve themselves in national protests and debates. In the decade preceding the Reform Bill a ‘West Country’ identity was continuously mobilised in service of national political aims. Both radical and conservative politicians used regional identities to not only secure their election but also to make national debates tangible and actionable to rural people. Equally, by seizing key local political spaces and deploying rural rituals the popular crowd were able to interject themselves into national political debates, allowing them to communicate their visions of an alternate political system.

KEYWORDS: nineteenth-century politics, regional identity, political protest, popular protest, rural ritual, electoral culture.

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Henry Bankes was almost guaranteed to win the Dorset parliamentary election of May 1831.[1] The county was a Tory heartland, and Bankes epitomised conservatism. He had spent fifty years in Parliament and was a vocal opponent of both Catholic Emancipation

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Southampton Centre for Nineteenth-Century Research conference in September 2018, and won the prize for best Post-Graduate paper. I would like to thank the participants of that conference for all their comments and suggestions. Additionally, I would like to thank Professor Isobel Armstrong and Professor Michael Wheeler for their encouraging comments on my submission to the paper competition.

and Parliamentary Reform. This had won him support from the local landholding electorate.[2] However, standing on the hustings at Dorchester in front of twelve thousand spectators, Bankes turned to his servant and whispered that once this election was done 'he wanted no more to do with the West Country scum.' He had failed to notice that his two Whig opponents were standing next to him and they happily relayed his comments to the assembled crowd. According to a local newspaper:

> Mr Bankes attempted to speak but he was instantly assailed by the most appalling and discordant noises; execrations and yells and hisses [...] the freeholders made a most determined rush, armed with bludgeons and sticks, tore Mr Bankes's standard into shreds, and, with a cheer, drove these miscreants over the great extent of the field.[3]

This humiliation, coupled with accusations that he had hired 'cudgel-men' to assault his opponents, forced Bankes to concede the election.[4] Consequently, and for the first time in its parliamentary history, Dorset returned two Whig candidates.[5]

For the past forty years, historical scholarship has often dismissed such events as part of the meaningless violence and revelry that accompanied elections in nineteenth-century England. Whilst it is relatively uncontroversial to suggest that electoral politics remained inherently local throughout this period, the connection between rural political protests and national concerns has remained rather tenuous.[6] Much of the research on rural popular political culture has characterised such violence as being driven by bribery or 'apolitical' and 'carnivalesque' excess. As such, many inhabitants of rural regions, such as the West Country, have been written off as 'pre-political' or 'inward facing'.[7] The cause of these limited horizons has, similarly, been

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[2] Stephen Farrell, 'BANKES, Henry (1756-1834).', in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1820-1832* ed. by David Fisher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[3] *Dorset County Chronicle*, 12 May 1831.

[4] *Sherborne Mercury*, 9 May 1831; 'Ponsonby to Bankes Regarding the Aftermath of the Election, 17 May 1831', Dorchester, Dorset History Centre, (hereafter *DHC*) D-BKL/D/B/2/40.

[5] Stephen Farrell, 'Dorset' in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1820-1832* ed. by David Fisher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[6] Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electorate of Hanoverian England, 1734-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 285-98. Subsequently O'Gorman, *Voters*; John Phillips, *The Great Reform Bill in the Boroughs: English Electoral Behaviour, 1818-1841* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 1-10.

[7] K. Theodore Hoppen, 'Grammars of Electoral Violence in 19th-Century England and Ireland', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 109, No. 432 (1994), 597-620; Justin Wasserman and Edwin Jaggard, 'Electoral

identified as a local obsession with regional identities and spaces. David Harvey labelled these attachments as 'militant particularism' and has argued that such a mindset was incompatible with wider class identity or the development of national protest movements.[8] The 'West Country Scum', therefore, have been portrayed as detached from national politics due to their focus on defending regional identities, interests, and spaces. This, supposedly, prevented them from ever truly engaging with national political concerns.

This article will demonstrate that such assessments have misrepresented West Country electoral culture and protest during the early-nineteenth century. Recent work by Jaggard on Cornwall and Scriven on Somerset has undermined previous assumptions regarding an 'isolated' South West, revealing a politically active population who were eager to debate national issues publicly.[9] Equally, research by Navickas and Parolin has highlighted the importance of the 'politics of space and place' in both disseminating political knowledge and allowing protestors to construct alternative political systems.[10] By reclaiming access to town halls, central squares or public houses, it is argued that radicals were critiquing their exclusion from national political institutions. Through these spaces political protestors could forcibly insert themselves into the official mechanisms of state, symbolically and physically. Yet, despite these theoretical developments, most studies on the 'politics of space and place' have focused on larger cities. Vernon, for example, has argued that politically contested sites were significantly less important in rural regions than in their urban counterparts where

Violence in Mid Nineteenth-Century England and Wales', *Historical Research*, 80 (2007), 124-55. For the West Country see: Kevin Bawn, 'Social Protest, Popular Disturbances and Public Order in Dorset' (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Reading, 1984), pp. 52-75, 208-25; Adrian Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 180-207.

[8] David Harvey, 'Militant Particularism and Global Ambition: The Conceptual Politics of Place, Space, and Environment in the Work of Raymond Williams', *Social Text*, 42 (1995), 65-98.

[9] Edwin Jaggard, *Cornwall Politics in the Age of Reform, 1790-1885* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press) esp. pp. 24-48, 74-103; Tom Scriven, *Popular Virtues: Continuity and Change in Radical Moral Politics, 1820-1870* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 44-66.

[10] Katrina Navickas, *Protest and Politics of Space and Place, 1789-1848* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Christina Parolin, *Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in London, 1790-c.1845* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2010).

space was at a premium.[11] This argument fails to recognise the cultural importance of specific locations to rural people. Even if rural radicals and protestors had more land to choose from this did not diminish the symbolic importance of specific locales. It will be shown throughout this article how certain rural political spaces served as bridges between the political periphery and the metropolitan centre. In assaulting these specific sites rural protestors could criticise prevailing exclusivity and privilege, both locally and nationally. Subsequently, the locally focused repertoires and discourses of provincial electoral culture should not be perceived as necessarily omitting national goals and aims. As Lawrence and Williams have noted, we cannot hope to understand popular political behaviour by studying either 'national' or 'local' factors in isolation. Instead, we need 'an analytical framework that sees movements, mediation and influence proceeding along a two-way street', connecting the local with the national.[12] By acting locally and promoting their West Country identities, protestors were attempting to make statements on matters of national importance. Concurrently, issues such as parliamentary reform were integrated into regional political debates through important rural rituals and sites. The 'West Country Scum' were not crippled by an attachment to regional identities and locales but used such aspects to engage with contemporary issues.

Central to the debates regarding the relationship between 'national' and 'local' political causes has been the issue of regional identity. Unfortunately, in this regard the West Country is poorly served, with most regional studies focusing on either the north or Celtic fringes of England.[13] Certainly, this paper does not seek to suggest that belief in a united 'West Country' identity was widespread across the entirety of South West England during this period. Counties such as Devon, Dorset and Somerset did not possess a reflective and conscious belief in a collective regional identity to the same degree as neighbouring Cornwall.[14] However, this does not necessarily preclude any involvement of an imagined collective West Country identity during times of political

[11] James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 213-4.

[12] Chris Williams, '"One Damn Election After Another": Politics and the Local Dimension', *Family & Community History*, 5:2 (2002), pp. 111-23; Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 165-70.

[13] Edward Royle, ed., *Issues of Regional Identity*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

[14] Jaggard, pp. 7-23.

tension and conflict. Regional identities serve to not only construct a 'language of difference', distinguishing one place from another, but also a 'language of integration' whereby those who meet the specified criteria are supposedly united in a common cause.[15] In areas like rural Dorset such discourses were evidently present, with the fear of the 'foreigner' engendering what Snell has described as a 'culture of local xenophobia'.[16] As one vicar wrote '[the labourer] loves the locality in which he was born [...] they will suffer anything at home, rather than become such "foreigners"'. [17] Subsequently, this article demonstrates how appellations such as 'foreigner' were used by politicians and the popular crowd alike to castigate opponents and construct a commonality between those who resisted, or supported, existing national political structures. The increasing use of regional identities in the West Country for political purposes will also be explored, highlighting how a growing belief in a noble, independent and generous 'yeoman' identity became of a central feature of electoral contests in the years preceding the Reform Bill. Admittedly unstable and often nebulous, these regional identities, much like the local focus on spaces and customs, were not inherently incompatible with national political protest.

The following section thus examines how parliamentary candidates used regional identities and causes between 1820 and 1832 to engender support during their electoral campaigns. Rather than a 'gentlemanly detachment' from local concerns it highlights how politicians frequently prioritised these issues.[18] Appealing directly to the voting population; the image of a noble, independent and masculine West Country yeomanry was frequently deployed in political discourse. This West Country identity, aimed specifically at the local electorate, did not hamper the dispersion of political knowledge but, rather, empowered it. Connections to regional concerns made national debates tangible and actionable to rural people. Equally, local reputation and identity also allowed a select few women, who were often excluded from official electoral rituals,

[15] Bernard Deacon, 'Regional Identity in Late Nineteenth-Century England: Discursive Terrains and Rhetorical Strategies', *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2016), 59-74.

[16] Keith Snell, 'The Culture of Local Xenophobia', *Social History*, Vol. 28, No.1 (2003), 1-30; Bawn, pp. 95-106.

[17] Rev. S.G. Osborne, *A Letter to the Right Hon. Lord Ashley M.P. on the Condition of the Agricultural Labourer* (Blandford, 1844), p. 36.

[18] O'Gorman, *Voters,* pp. 108-41, 285-98.

to take leading roles.[19] The article then reveals how popular crowds deployed local rituals and identities during periods of electoral violence to protest national political issues in local spaces. These riots were not merely drunken acts of vandalism but part of a coherent desire to reshape national politics by challenging local spaces of exclusivity. Indeed, the claims from the political elite that the 'yeomanry' were a paternalistic and generous ruling class were often used against them by the popular crowd. Capturing key political sites allowed the rural poor to momentarily articulate alternative political outlooks in an electoral system which sought to prevent any meaningful participation from the unenfranchised. Both elite politicians and rural crowds, therefore, used local concerns and identities to engage in national protests and debates.

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By the early-nineteenth century there was a growing consensus in counties such as Somerset and Dorset that their farming populations were a unique breed. Local surveys confirmed that amongst the 'West Country yeomanry' there was 'no want of justice, candour and liberality in their dealings' and whilst 'they are also far too fond of old custom' West Countrymen were known for their 'habits of sobriety, honesty and industry'.[20] The term 'yeoman' had long since lost its specific economic meaning, that of a small but independent farmer, but had retained essential moral characteristics. It harkened back to a pastoral idyll and conjured images of rural masculinity, political independence and superior morality.[21] In its political coverage, the local press enthusiastically adopted this language, depicting a noble yeoman class beset on all sides by corruptive influences. Reflecting on the passing of the Reform Bill, the *Dorset County Chronicle* grumbled that 'these levelling reformers' wished to eliminate all that has 'warmed the heart of every true Englishman', namely the 'nobility and independence' of 'our local yeomen'.[22] There was a great deal of overlap, therefore,

[19] Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 21-3. Subsequently Lawrence, *Electing*.

[20] John Billingsley, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Somerset* (London, 1798), p. 34; William Stevenson, *General View of the Agriculture of Dorset* (London, 1812), pp. 453-4.

[21] Kathryn Beresford, '"Witnesses for the Defence": The Yeomen of Old England and the Land Question', c. 1815-1837' in *The Land Question in Britain, 1750-1950*, ed. by Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 37-56.

[22] *Dorset County Chronicle*, 14 January 1836.

between the West Country yeoman and appeals to the 'freeborn rights of Englishmen' seen elsewhere during this period.[23] However, unlike the more general national appeal the West Country yeomanry sourced their prestige from local history and their connection with the land and its resources. As one Dorsetshire election ballad attested:

> We boast our descent from those Foresters bold,
> Who with *Billy the Norman* made merry of old;
> And, like them, we'll our lives and honours defend,
> While we've *Billy the Fourth* for our sailor and friend.[24]

In these rural counties landed property was subsequently emphasised over industrial and commercial wealth as the source of authority and disinterested leadership.[25] The independent yeoman farmer, deriving his power from both his lands and noble heritage, became central to political debates in these counties.

Naturally, a desire to protect this honourable and independent yeomanry helped shape regional political causes. Between 1820 and 1832, a period of agricultural depression, repeated calls were made for parliament to 'adopt such measures as may alleviate the existing and accumulating distress of the landed interest'. This relief not only the included the lowering of 'rents, tithes and taxes' but also policies such as: protecting the cottage silk and woollen trades from being 'stolen' by the industrial north, tightening the Game Laws, ending 'the unjust operation of the New Turnpike Act', querying 'the propriety of appropriating parts of the Crown Lands to the service of agriculture', 'No Popery' and 'No Irishmen'.[26] Linking all these issues were a series of common threads; namely the belief that the West Country was under threat from outside influences and that the landed interest in these counties deserved recognition for their services. Such notions were not merely the idle talk of a deferent or venal farming population.[27] In 1826, for example, the Marquis of Anglesey attempted to pressure his tenantry into supporting his preferred Whig candidate for the Dorset

[23] Vernon, pp. 206-12; Randall, p. 207.

[24] A New Song to An Old Tune, *DHC*, D-ANG/B/5/42.

[25] Vernon, p. 30; J.R. Fisher, 'The Limits of Deference: Agricultural Communities in a Mid-Nineteenth Century Election Campaign', *Journal of British Studies*, 21:1 (1981), pp. 90-105.

[26] Examples taken from county meetings and electoral speeches: *Taunton Courier*, 22 January 1823; *Dorset County Chronicle*, 6 October 1831; *Western Flying Post*, 9 May 1831.

[27] Frank O'Gorman, 'Electoral Deference in "Unreformed" England: 1760-1832', *Journal of Modern* History, Vol. 56, No. 3 (1984), pp. 391-429. Subsequently O'Gorman, 'Electoral Deference'.

county elections. His embattled steward simply replied that all attempts had failed and 'all of your lordships servants are as against Mr Portman as any other candidate supporting Catholic Emancipation'.[28] An anonymous letter to *The Times* confirmed this opposition stating that with 'the Marquis not having been here for many years' the farming population would not submit to 'the management of an attorney, who lives 20 miles distant'.[29] Such was the power of these local causes that even noble landlords were condemned as ignorant foreigners.

Thus, whilst several historians have argued that championing a 'regionalist' mindset or policies was often considered anathema to political candidates during the nineteenth century, the realities of local electoral campaigns triumphed over these concerns.[30] Colonel Tynte, a candidate for Bridgwater in 1826, proudly declared that 'nothing on earth shall induce me to enter on a canvass, for I conceive it would be altogether inconsistent with those principles of independence [...] and the future welfare and purity of the cause [of Reform].'[31] Even the commonplace electoral ritual of the canvass, whereby candidates would parade through the town and listen to local concerns, was deemed by Tynte to be unacceptable. However, his decision to abstain sent shockwaves across Bridgwater, and, following the nomination of an unexpected third candidate, Tynte was soon obliged to hold an 'enthusiastic meeting' for nearly two hundred of his supporters at a local inn 'to preserve the peace of the borough.' There Tynte reaffirmed his affection for the locality declaring that Bridgwater was 'a splendid and enviable example of public virtue to all England.'[32] Concurrently, Tynte's supposed political opponent, the avowedly 'local' Tory William Astell, canvassed the electors with the aim of securing re-election for both himself and Tynte as nothing would 'induce him to break off that friendship which they had contracted since their joint return to parliament.'[33] Consequently, during the 1820s it was easy for a candidate to remain aloof, detached and 'nationally minded' when their parliamentary seat was

[28] William Castleman's Notebook, *DHC*, D-ANG/B/6/2.

[29] *The Times*, 31 August 1826.

[30] Lawrence, *Electing,* p. 19-21; O'Gorman, *Voters*, pp. 108-41, 285-98; Miles Taylor, 'Interests, Parties and the State: The Urban Electorate in England, c. 1820-72' in *Party, State, and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain Since 1820,* ed. by Jon Lawrence and M. Taylor, (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1997), pp. 65-6.

[31] 'Colonel Tynte's Answer, Taunton, Somerset Heritage Centre (hereafter *SHC*), DD\S\WH/351.

[32] *Taunton Courier,* 15 February; 22 February 1826.

[33] *Taunton Courier,* 1 March 1826.

left uncontested. In the uncertainty of an electoral campaign, however, even the most devout follower of the 'principles of independence' had to engage to some degree with the local population and their concerns.

Luckily for candidates like Tynte, such contests were relatively rare. Prior to the reorganisation of parliamentary seats in 1832 no West Country constituency returned less than two members of parliament. As O'Gorman has argued, whilst it was a common, albeit not universal, practice for tenant farmers to 'reserve' one vote for their 'landlord's interests' it was a point of pride that they were free to use the rest however they wished.[34] Thus, supporting a 'nationally minded' candidate did not necessarily preclude the same voter from also putting his support behind a strongly 'localist' man. It was only during the rare instance of a by-election that electors were forced to make a clear choice. When only a single seat was in contention voting patterns and levels of partisanship changed dramatically.[35] Consequently, these contests often forced parliamentary candidates to address both national and local concerns in order to ensure success. During the Dorset by-election of October 1831, Tory candidate Lord Ashley found himself trailing by only ten votes on the final day of polling. Subsequently, at the Dorchester hustings where Bankes had been assaulted six months previously, Ashley proclaimed himself to be the defender of South West announcing that the peace, tranquillity and ancient institutions of the West Country 'are to be overthrown and destroyed by a measure concocted in the space of three short months!' He warned the crowd that in a reformed parliament 'the South and West of England will not be adequately represented' and that 'the interests and political influence of agricultural counties would be transferred to towns.'[36] The febrile atmosphere of the ongoing Reform Crisis naturally leant such an election immense national importance. However, Ashley presented the Reform Bill as a measure that would not only cause countrywide chaos but also endanger the sanctity and influence of the West Country. Furthermore, Ashley presented himself as the protector of those rights and freedoms which were, apparently, unique to this region of England. West Country identities were thus

[34] O'Gorman, 'Electoral Deference', pp. 399-403.

[35] Philip Salmon, '"Plumping Contests": The Impact of By Elections on English Voting Behaviour, 1790-1868', in *By-Elections in British Politics, 1832-1914*, ed. by T.G. Otte and Paul Readman (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), pp. 23-51.

[36] *Dorset County Chronicle*, 6 October 1831.

deployed by Ashley with opposition towards parliamentary reform intertwined with local obsessions over prestige, dignity and 'foreign' influence.

Whilst conservatives envisioned parliamentary reform as a threat to local tranquillity, reformist candidates instead presented such legislature as the only solution to the regions internal and external maladies. During the early-nineteenth century radical politicians such as Henry Hunt sought to champion local causes in order to integrate national political debate into local electoral culture and win over the rural population of the West Country. Hunt was a seasoned radical orator and advocate for universal male suffrage. In 1819, immediately following the Peterloo Massacre, Hunt had been arrested for sedition and imprisoned in Ilchester gaol, Somerset. During his imprisonment Hunt became invested in the county's administration and, following his release, he ran for one of the counties' parliamentary seats.[37] This challenge outraged the two incumbent members, Thomas Lethbridge and William Dickinson, who immediately sought to discredit the radical candidate. Hunt was described as a 'foreigner' who hoped to achieve 'a momentary triumph by hurling the poisoned missiles of calumny and falsehood against the honourable men who are opposed to his strange and unpalatable politics.'[38] The *Bath Chronicle* agreed, reporting that, in London, Hunt was a mere 'dealer in black coffee' and that a merchant could never hope to understand 'this county and its people.'[39] The 'culture of local xenophobia' was thus deployed with Hunt's radicalism being 'unpalatable' to the people Somerset. The candidates continued this assault during the elections, with Lethbridge claiming:

> He began his career in the county not until he was kicked out of every honourable description of society; and he has not ceased since the first moment of his coming among you, to mislead you, and to strive to bring you to dishonour [...] you would find no truly British spirit there.[40]

In these speeches Hunt was presented as both a political exile and a moral danger to Somerset. Not only was he a 'foreigner' in terms of the West Country but even his Britishness was questioned. Evidently, the term 'foreigner' was nebulous yet still contained unpatriotic suggestions. In these speeches both regional and national

[37] John Belchem, *'Orator' Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working Class Radicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[38] *Taunton Courier*, 12 February 1823.

[39] *Bath Chronicle*, 16 December 1824.

[40] *Taunton Courier*, 21 June 1826.

identity coalesced to condemn Hunt. His supposed lack of 'British spirit' referenced earlier condemnations of republican figures such as Tom Paine.[41] Indeed, Hunt was accused of 'endeavouring to produce discord by sowing Paine's bones in the fields of Somerset.'[42] Hunt was therefore presented as a creature utterly alien to Somerset, a man whose political stances would only serve to induce chaos locally and, in so doing, endanger the region and nation.

The labelling of Hunt as a 'political adventurer' was aided by Lethbridge's and Dickinson's control over local political sites.[43] Despite Vernon's claims that public houses were 'invariably' hired out to the highest bidder during elections, Hunt was utterly incapable of doing so in 1826. In both Yeovil and Wells, Hunt was 'refused admission' due to fears that supporting his campaign would draw the ire of the incumbent members, who were both wealthy local landowners.[44] This strategy was also an attempt to recast Hunt as an 'exile' who no-one could have 'had the assurance to imagine that the Freeholders of Somersetshire would intrust their interests to.' However, this banishment also allowed Hunt to construct new spaces of political knowledge. In Yeovil, after being ejected from the Mermaid Inn, Hunt travelled to the Three Cloughs, a poorer establishment on the outskirts of town, whereupon:

> He dined at the market-table; and when the cloth was removed, amused the farmers and labourers, for three quarters of an hour, with a statement on their grievances, the crimes of the Magistrates, and the total incompetency of the present members.[45]

Rather than the silk banners, fine dining and eloquent speeches that usually accompanied electoral dinners, Hunt had instead inverted the usual customs. The 'market-table' was one of the cheaper dining tables at the inn, and a tablecloth replaced the usual banner.[46] Taking advantage of his 'exile' from polite political society, Hunt

[41] Nicholas Rogers, 'Burning Tom Paine: Loyalism and Counter-Revolution in Britain, 1792-3', *Histoire Sociale/Social History,* Vol. 32, No.64 (1994), 139-71.

[42] *Taunton Courier*, 29 January 1823.

[43] *Taunton Courier,* 31 May 1826.

[44] Vernon, pp. 214-20; *Taunton Courier*, 31 May 1826, 7 June 1826. For licensing laws see: Parolin, pp. 179-243.

[45] *Taunton Courier*, 31 May 1826.

[46] James Epstein, 'Radical Dining, Toasting and Symbolic Expression in Early Nineteenth Century Lancashire: Rituals of Solidarity', *Albion*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1988), pp. 271-91.

embraced the identity of a West Country farmer. By converting this new space, Hunt had an opportunity to recast himself as a champion of the local downtrodden.

Subsequently, throughout the electoral campaign Hunt continuously emphasised his connections to the West Country. In response to Lethbridge's comments about his 'British spirit' Hunt issued a sarcastic reply: 'I understand Sir Thomas Lethbridge has been prattling about 'Itinerant Orators' attending the meeting. I shall come from my estate in Glastonbury – perhaps the bristly Baronet will come from his estate – in the Moon'.[47] What Lethbridge had neglected to mention, was that Hunt was Lord of the Manor of Glastonbury Twelve Hides. Following his release from Ilchester gaol in 1823, Hunt regularly returned to his manor and presided over his Court Leet. During this ceremony Hunt listened to local grievances and appointed officers to police the 'correct and fair' weights and measures of the marketplace.[48] Hunt thus transformed himself from a 'foreign' radical into the very model of a paternalistic local lord. This plan seems to have succeeded as it was reported that in one meeting the Glastonbury farmers proclaimed that while 'the Corporation laugh at us, and say they don't care a fig for us' Hunt was worthy of 'the great authority of Alfred' and was a 'man of true county stock'.[49] Hunt was beloved in this community, not simply for being a Lord but for epitomising a West Country identity. During the Court Leet, Hunt also conducted the ancient ritual of Perambulation, whereupon Hunt traversed his manor's borders to ensure no trespasses had taken place. Such an act connected Hunt with both his tenants and the landscape of Somerset. A small farmer later recounted a feeling of 'awe' as Hunt stopped at his home to refresh himself with a cup of cider.[50] Since the medieval period Perambulation had been a key ritual in defining who was, and was not, a formal member of village society. The boundaries set and confirmed during these ceremonies not only reinforced cultural bonds but also defined eligibility for charity or poor relief.[51] Consequently, rather than deny his regional attachments or present himself as superior to rural squabbles, Hunt directly engaged in local society. By

[47] *Morning Chronicle*, 23 January 1823.

[48] Henry Hunt to the Radical Reformers, *SHC*, SERIAL 6/21; Town Clerk of Glastonbury to the Home Office, National Archives, London, HO 40/17, f. 369.

[49] *Morning Post*, 30 October 1826.

[50] William Goodson's Diary, 1794-1849', *SHC*, A\ATT/1.

[51] David Fletcher, 'The Parish Boundary: A Social Phenomenon in Hanoverian England', *Rural History*, 14 (2003), pp. 177-96.

becoming the personification of a landed West Country gentleman, alongside rituals that directly connected himself with the local environment, Hunt was attempting to make his radicalism as much a part of the Somerset landscape as his manor's borders.

To fully integrate local concerns with radical policies Hunt also attempted to demonstrate that the current unreformed political system was a corruptive influence which had damaged the reputation of the region. In 1816 a ship known as the *Greyhound* ran aground on the Galver Sands near Bridgwater. The lighthouse that was supposed to have warned the crew had fallen into disrepair and was unmanned. Over one hundred lives were lost, including a party of local townspeople who had attempted to save the crew.[52] Even a decade later, newspapers described the catastrophe as a 'black mark on our town and county.'[53] During his electoral speeches in 1826, Hunt explicitly linked national corruption, noble privilege and parliamentary reform with this 'black mark.' Lethbridge and Dickinson, Hunt claimed, were puppets of 'Old Corruption' siphoning money from the region to pay 'the great paupers who do mischief in society.' Without these 'sinecurists' those 'accidents would never had happened in consequence.'[54] Hunt not only countered claims that his radical politics was 'foreign' to the West Country but also established how national corruption and political exclusivity had disastrous local consequences. Criticising proposals from Lethbridge and Dickinson to lower tithes and protect corn prices Hunt declared that such 'milk and water' policies did 'not go to the root of the evil.'[55] It was not Hunt's demands for radical reform that were 'poisoned missiles' threatening Somerset but the corruption of existing political institutions. Radical reform was thus the only real corrective to the corruption of men such as Lethbridge and Dickinson. In this sense, there was no sharp divide between national political concerns and local identity. Politicians like Hunt deployed both simultaneously to achieve their goals.

It was this mobilisation of local identity and relationships in service of national political aims that granted some elite women an opportunity to engage in regional politics. As with all aspects of society, nineteenth-century electoral rituals were highly gendered. The hustings, for example, were portrayed as an exclusively male space. Lord

[52] *Morning Post*, 8 January 1816.

[53] *Bridgwater and Somerset Herald*, 12 February 1826.

[54] *Taunton Courier*, 22 June 1826.

[55] *Taunton Courier,* 22 January 1823.

Ashley encapsulated contemporary feelings when he announced that 'if it were consistent with female delicacy, I am sure she [his wife] would come to these hustings.'[56] With enough local influence, however, certain women could overcome these boundaries. At the West Somerset Elections of 1834, Mary Sanford took it upon herself to canvass for her son, Edward Sanford, following the crowd's 'unfavourable' reaction to his candidature. Edward was thus shipped off to Gibraltar whilst the noble matriarch of the Sanford family campaigned for him.[57] Mary's position as head of a local noble family allowed her to leverage the name of her family and overcome the traditional barriers facing women in nineteenth-century politics. Even women who did not command as much respect as Mary Sandford were still often appealed to during the canvas. In Ilchester it had become a tradition that, at each election, local women were treated to bottles of wine by election agents whilst they danced down the high street.[58] The reasoning behind such displays are readily obvious when consulting the reports of election agents. In Bridport, for example, it was reported that Joseph Batson's wife 'manages and controls him' and thus she was paid £7 for her husband's vote.[59] As Gleadle has argued, middle-class and aristocratic women during the nineteenth-century were not wholly excluded from the masculine political world but were viewed as 'borderline citizens'.[60] The exclusion of women at the national level of politics, was mediated and adapted by the realities of local society and reputation. Leveraging noble status or their personal relationships provided these women with a degree of power generally unseen elsewhere.

Although some politicians may have found it distasteful, the practicalities of early nineteenth-century elections ensured that candidates became invested in local concerns and customs. By capitalising on local spaces, rituals and legacies even those not considered traditional political subjects could become involved in national debates. Regional identity was malleable and adaptive and so both conservatives and radicals sought to prove themselves as the true supporters of the landed interest. Far from

[56] *Dorset County Chronicle*, 6 October 1831.

[57] Mary Sanford to E.A. Sanford, 1834, *SHC*, DD/SF/7/5/15.

[58] Memories of Ilchester, *SHC*, A\CTP/1/12/18.

[59] Election Agent's Record of the Canvass, *DHC*, D-COL/X/7.

[60] Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 2-34.

precluding national political knowledge, the intertwining of national and local concerns by candidates like Hunt enabled the West Country electorate to become directly involved with debates surrounding Britain's political future.

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Electoral contests, however, did not solely revolve around the actions of the enfranchised. Whilst it was the elite West Country electorate that candidates inevitably sought to win over, the unenfranchised were also increasingly adopting regional identities, rituals and customs to serve national political aims. In the years preceding 1832 the vast crowds that gathered at the hustings were comprised primarily of non-voters. These public political displays were often the only opportunity for the bulk of the rural population had to engage with their representatives. Subsequently, 'clamour and the most boisterous interruptions' were commonplace and it was not uncommon that 'not one of the speakers could be heard five yards from the spot on which he stood.'[61] Early nineteenth-century elections were not designed to accommodate nuanced speechwriting or rhetorical genius but were exercises in the command of visual culture and crowd management.[62] Moreover, elections provided a periodic opportunity for a public assessment of the conduct of the local ruling classes. The landed elite were supposed to represent the common interest, of both the electorate and unenfranchised poor. If it was believed that they had neglected this duty, elections also provided an occasion to forcibly remind the elite about their obligations.[63] By utilising their strength in numbers and controlling key local spaces, the unenfranchised popular crowd could thus both involve themselves in national political issues and exploit the grandiose claims of the West Country yeoman's generosity and charitability.

Whilst their formal involvement at the hustings was either limited or non-existent, by controlling this key local political space popular crowds in the West Country attempted to critique and reshape local and national political systems.[64] Civil disturbances during elections, therefore, were often conducted with the hope of directly influencing the political process. During the Weymouth elections of 1826, opposition

[61] *Taunton Courier,* 26 December 1832; *Bath Chronicle*, 12 May 1831.

[62] Paul Pickering, 'Class Without Words: Symbolic Communication in the Chartist Movement', *Past and Present*, Vol. 112 No. 1 (1986), pp. 144-62

[63] Fisher, pp. 99-104; O'Gorman, 'Electoral Deference', pp. 396-9.

[64] Navickas, pp. 3-19.

towards the corporation's 'Union', an alliance between conservative and liberal corporators to each send two members to parliament, found its expression in battles over the hustings. The popular crowd had thrown its support behind an independent candidate, Colonel Gordon, as 'there was a common belief amongst the lower orders that the Union no longer served their needs'. From the second day of polling the crowd overwhelmed the small hall where the hustings were situated and:

> overpowered the few friends of the Union that made their way into it. The Blues acted upon a regular system of obstructing the voters for the union from entering the hall [...] The voters for the Union were pointed out to the Gordonites or Blues, three or four of these would surround a voter for the Union and carry him by force away from the door of the hall.[65]

This group, primarily comprised of non-voters, had seized the political space and were dictating who could and could not vote at the hustings. This was not some disorganised riot but a calculated strategy. Unable to legally vote for their candidate, controlling this space was the only opportunity the unenfranchised had to influence the political process. The hustings were an exclusive political space that welcomed only those with the franchise. By occupying this site, the people of Weymouth were inserting themselves into the official structures of politics, symbolically and physically. So great was the crowd's obstruction that eventually the 6th Dragoons barricaded the town hall; those who wished to vote entering via a ladder.[66] If, as Vernon claims, this tactic of 'packing the hall' had collapsed in larger constituencies due to the moving of hustings to outdoor venues, then it was the unique nature of these small rural boroughs which empowered the crowd.[67] At Weymouth, the crowd understood both the practical and symbolic importance of the hustings to the political process. By challenging the 'Union' in this manner not only were they criticising the neglect of the local populace by the corporation, but they were also involving themselves in the previously exclusive national political process. Those who did not accept the crowd's political views were physically exiled from the community.

It was the belief that the physical environment of rural England needed to be cleansed so that political reform could occur that also encouraged assaults on the

[65] Case for Opinion on the Weymouth Parliamentary Election, *DHC*, D-FAR/B/L/1, ff. 1-3.

[66] *The Times*, 22 June 1826

[67] Vernon, pp. 89-102.

homes of electoral agents during periods of electoral violence. As noted previously, speeches from politicians such as Hunt consistently referenced national corruption as endangering and infecting rural localities. Popular crowds sought to physically prevent any infection. During the riots that followed the Dorset by-election of 1831, for example, the crowd acted upon allegations from reformers that their candidate, Ponsonby, had lost due to 'the trickery of the lawyers and the partiality of the assessor' and so 'the houses of the attorneys of Lord Ashley […] were thus marked out as objects of violence.'[68] This 'violence' came in the form of breaking into their homes and 'destroying every document, paper and book on which they could lay their hands.' It was reported that 'the ransacking was so complete that the streets for some distance in the vicinity of these gentlemen's offices, were strewed with parchments and paper.'[69] By purposefully targeting the official documents stored within these homes the crowd was literally seizing the mechanics of state and destroying them. As in Weymouth this was an attempt to take control of the political process. Ponsonby had been defeated by the legal papers of the poll clerks and so the crowd sought to eliminate these documents. The destruction of these houses also served to drive out 'malicious influences', men who had acted dishonourably and thus failed their local obligations. Referring to one political agent the crowd's leader announced: 'the bald headed shall not pass over Blandford Bridge alive.'[70] By destroying their homes and denying them access to the town these supposedly corrupt political agents had been forcibly removed from the local community. Controlling physical place in both Blandford and Weymouth was just as meaningful as any political speech, banner or ritual. By seizing sites such as the hustings or the homes of political agents, the crowd demonstrated their belief that the current dishonourable state of British politics was unacceptable and those who supported it were no longer welcome. Rather than mindless looting or drunken inarticulate violence, for the briefest moment these rural communities could construct their own ideal political world.

The punishing of those who had failed to uphold the 'common interest' was aided by rural shaming rituals. At Bridgwater in 1832 the West Country custom of

[68] *The Times*, 20 October 1831; *Dorset County Chronicle*, 27 October 1831.

[69] John James Smith's Account of the Blandford Riots, University of Bristol Special Collections, Bristol, DM58 Pinney (Domestic) Box B4, Bundle 5, f. 1.

[70] *Dorset County Chronicle*, 22 March 1832.

'skimmington riding' or 'rough music' was deployed to protest a Tory electoral victory. The disturbance began when John Bowen, a local magistrate and anti-Reformer, arrested a man for drunkenness during the post-election revelry. Subsequently:

> The crowd commenced by uttering cries of vengeance against Mr. Bowen and 'all the Blue party' [...] his premises being at that time surrounded by a mob consisting of not less than two hundred persons, most of whom were armed with large sticks, and many of them in disguise. Soon after Mr. Bowen had entered, cries were uttered by the mob 'We will have him out or pull down the premises'.[71]

It was revealed in court that 'one of the mob had his face blackened' whilst another was 'wearing fake curls and a dress'. Their leader was playing a bugle whilst wearing a 'large great coat, with a cape that came all around his body'.[72] The presence of blackface, discordant music and crossdressing embed this act within the ritual structures of 'skimmington riding.' This form of communal punishment was usually reserved for adulterers or cuckolds. In its traditional setting, those accused of moral or sexual crimes were visited by a procession of villagers beating pans, blowing horns and screaming the supposed crimes of the victim. The blackened faces were not simply a disguise. Rather, the masks and costumes enabled the perpetrators to overcome their individuality and the crowd became a representation of the community. Crossdressing, similarly, not only allowed the crowd to 'act out' sexual crimes in lurid detail but also represented a damning moral judgement. Women were generally seen in rural society as the judges of moral character, and so by crossdressing during protest men attempted to adopt this power. 'Skimmington riding' was thus a form of remonstrance against those who endangered the moral code of rural society.[73] By performing such a ritual outside Bowen's home, the protestors were directly likening his political activities with gross sexual misdemeanours. John Bowen, and the entire Tory party, were degraded to the level of a henpecked husband or adulterous woman. Furthermore, 'skimmington riding' was also traditionally coupled with the removal of an offender from the local community. Bowen's political actions had exiled him from West Country society, much like the sexual crimes of the cuckold. The enforcement of this exile was

[71] *London Evening Standard,* 20 December 1832.

[72] 'Election Riot at Bowen's House in Bridgwater, 1832', *SHC*, DD\CLE/6/1.

[73] Martin Ingram, 'Ridings, Rough Music and Mocking Rhymes in Early Modern England', in B. Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 166-97; Edward Thompson, 'Rough Music Reconsidered', *Folklore*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (1992), pp. 3-26.

attempted not only symbolically through this shaming ritual but also physically. Cries of 'Down with premises!' and 'Away with the Blues!' permeated the crowd and as the night progressed many of those gathered around Bowen's home, including an increasing number dressed as women, attempted to pull down his house.[74] Bowen's home became a bridge between local ritual and national politics. The corruption of the Tories had to be cleansed, and by destroying both Bowen and his home Bridgwater could be freed from their influences.

Blackface, crossdressing and 'skimmington rides' were not impediments to national political protest but aids. Their appearance provided local protestors with protest repertoires that allowed them to express their distaste for the current state of British politics. A similar assault occurred in Poole in 1831 where the crowd specifically targeted a beer shop 'kept by a man named Hoare, who had voted for Lord Ashley'.[75] Hoare attempted to scare the crowd by firing his musket, but he was:

> knocked down; and whilst down, was struck a violent blow on his arm. They then hauled him up and tumbled him about. He was led by the mob away from the house [with] a particular kind of whistle from one of the mob which was followed by a cheer and a huzza.[76]

Hoare was carried through the streets as the crowd played 'rough music'. To ensure that all onlookers identified Hoare the crowd also stole his pub sign and paraded it in front of him.[77] Deploying these ritual forms invested political protests with cultural legitimacy through precedence and association.[78] 'Skimmington Riding', at its core, was a shaming ritual used to castigate a member of the community who had failed in their societal obligations and expectations. Both Bowen and Hoare had been assaulted for their support of national corruption and thus failing to uphold the expected values of the West Country. For those who participated these rituals helped perform political concerns through the language of custom. The crowds at Bridgwater and Poole were not only cleansing corruption locally, but also demonstrating their opposition to

[74] Notes of Trials Arising Out of an Election Riot, *SHC*, DD\CLE/6/1.

[75] *Dorset County Chronicle*, 20 October 1831.

[76] *Dorset County Chronicle*, 15 March 1832.

[77] William Mate, *Then and Now: Or Fifty Years Ago. Facts, Ancient and Modern, Connected with the County of Dorset and the South-West of England* (Poole, 1883), p. 102.

[78] Carl Griffin, 'Affecting Violence: Language, Gesture and Performance in Early Nineteenth-Century English Popular Protest', *Historical Geography*, 36 (2008), pp. 139-62.

contemporary political structures by likening their supporters to the dregs of rural society.

The West Country's regional identity was thus deployed in political protest as a symbol of purity and in resisting corrupting and 'foreign' influences violence was sanctioned and legitimised. This was true for not only men but also women. Popular participation in protest was much less discriminatory than official political structures and so women occasionally took leading roles in local activity. Outside the town of Lyme in 1831, for instance, a group of women stopped a party of Lord Ashley's voters: 'large stones were thrown' and 'fire-works were let off to the great danger of frightening the horses.'[79] Meanwhile, in Sherborne a 'monstrous orderly mob' headed by women surrounded the local public house and threatened to 'pull the place down' unless they were given 'charity', whereupon 'some beer was given them.'[80] Such a demand was founded not only on the paternal elites supposed obligation to help the poor but, as noted previously, the common local identification with a generous ancient yeomanry. At Yeovil in 1831, Eliza Hodges did not lack for courage when she was stopped by an officer of the Yeomanry Cavalry, and cried out: "d__n you, who are you? I did not expect to see such a set of strange fellows as you, I could lick a score of you', I said I had an order from the magistrates to clear the street; she said 'd__n you and the magistrates too'.[81] Hodges' description of the Yeomanry as 'strange fellows' may have been an attempt to align these men with 'foreign' influence and her open rebellion is indicative of how quickly law and order could collapse during election season. As these examples demonstrate, the desire to enforce elite obligations and protect local communities from corruptive influences was shared by both men and women across the West Country.

It would be wrong, however, to regard the regional identity of the West Country, and its associated rituals, as merely defensive in nature. It was not some innocent Arcadian pastoral idyll that solely existed to be defended from the onslaught of metropole and modernity. These rituals and spaces were also weapons that could be used to proactively strike against local and national political structures. During the Shaftesbury election contest of 1830, for instance, local concerns regarding access to local space combined with national debates surrounding political representation. The

[79] *Dorset County Chronicle*, 6 October 1831.

[80] *Sherborne Mercury,* 19 March 1832; *The Times* 29 October 1831.

[81] *Sherborne Mercury,* 9 April 1832.

election was contested by Knowles, a popular independent candidate, and Chitty, the candidate of local landlord and 'boroughmonger' Lord Grosvenor.[82] Immediately, Knowles' campaign became focused on parliamentary reform. To the ten thousand who had gathered in Shaftesbury Knowles announced that this was a battle for 'bursting asunder the chains of political slavery.'[83] However, as the campaign continued a new issue arose, namely access to the local public house, the Grosvenor Arms. The inn overlooked the hustings and was owned by Lord Grosvenor; subsequently Chitty's supporters made frequent use of a specially constructed balcony that overlooked the town square. The supporters of Knowles and Reform were, unsurprisingly, denied access as the publican admitted he dared not 'risk giving offence to the Earl Grosvenor's agents, which might lead to a notice to quit.'[84] The Grosvenor Arms, therefore, was quickly becoming a local symbol for corruption and exclusive political practices. During the election campaign the issues of national reform and access to the local inn began to coalesce. During the canvass one of Knowles' supporters began railing against the 'great corrupt edifice' that was the current House of Commons. He concluded his speech by standing outside the Grosvenor Arms bellowing:

> Let us storm yonder castle of corruption, and I will assist you to place the banner of freedom and independence on its summit. Now we have put on the armour of liberty let us not cast it off, till we have trodden under our feet, that double headed monster, tyranny and corruption.[85]

In this speech the House of Commons, Old Parliamentary Corruption and Shaftesbury's corrupt oligarchy were all connected through this local space of exclusivity. The people of Shaftesbury could easily equate the national exclusivity of the unreformed parliament with their own local experiences. It provided a very real and understandable reconstruction of abstract political structures. The shame and annoyance of being denied access to the local inn amplified the calls for parliamentary reform. After Knowles eventual defeat, the people followed the demands of his supporters literally and stormed the public house breaking down its doors and ransacking the bar.[86] The local state of the Grosvenor Arms represented in microcosm the national political situation.

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[82] *History of the Shaftesbury Election 1830* (Shaftesbury, 1831), pp. xii-xv, 1-11.

[83] ibid., p. 3.

[84] ibid., p. 37.

[85] ibid., p. 36.

[86] Captain R.J. Fawcett to Lord Melbourne, 6 August 1830, *NA*, HO 52/7, f. 269.

It was, in effect, an effigy of the House of Commons. Through acting out their concerns in this local space the people of Shaftesbury were aligning themselves with the national movement for Reform.

Rural electoral violence during the nineteenth-century should not be dismissed as the work of drunken, 'inward-facing' rustics. Between 1820 and 1832, West Country crowds used their ability to control local spaces to interject themselves in the official mechanisms of electoral politics. These political sites served as bridges between the political periphery and the metropolitan centre. By incorporating national issues into local spaces, rural people were able to assert their agency and through performance give voice to their concerns. Elections provided a period where the popular crowd could judge their representatives and superiors and assault those who they believed were corrupting their locality. In eliminating these threats, however, the rural crowd also communicated their vision of an alternate political system both locally and nationally.

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In confusing the repertoires of rural political protestors with their overall aims, historians have risked parroting the arguments of the nineteenth-century political elite. Rural protests have often been envisioned as either drunken mobs or wholly concerned with local issues to the detriment of their engagement with national politics. This article, conversely, has demonstrated how elite politicians, the electorate, and the popular crowd in the South West deployed their local identities and traditions to aid their political endeavours. Rural identities, customs and rituals were not politically limiting in the slightest. Notions such as the 'West Country yeomanry' or terms such as 'foreigner' were reflexive and became enrolled in debates regarding national political concerns. Equally, in the febrile period immediately preceding the Reform Bill, national issues were adapted into local debates and understood through these local identities, rituals and attitudes. These local elements provided participants in political conflicts with regional frames of reference through which they could understand and act upon national concerns. West Country identities were also used as weapons and those who held opposing views on matters of national interest were deemed as traitors to their local community. Similarly, popular crowds could easily use the exclusive identities of the local elite to their advantage, demanding that the supposedly generous and independent West Country yeomanry fulfil their obligations.

Navickas has argued that for urban radicals 'the civic body politic represented in microcosm what the national should be.'[87] Such feelings were equally present in rural regions and extended to many different political spaces. Public houses, the hustings or even culturally significant fields were all contested by rural political protestors. Historians have often focused on the struggle for free speech rather than assemblage, but for rural protestors gaining access to certain political sites was just as important as any speech or song. Their exclusion from these spaces represented the repression of the prevailing political system. By placing themselves into these spaces, rural protestors could symbolically contest their political exclusion whilst physically reshaping local politics to a preferred form. Through the deployment of shaming rituals like 'skimmington rides' or the banishing of 'corrupt' political agents the rural crowd demonstrated that the existing practices of the political elite were no longer accepted within their local communities.

The 'West Country Scum', therefore, were not detached due to their strong regional identity and desire to protect local spaces, they were empowered. As contemporary debates continue over the relationship between Westminster and 'provincial' Britain, it is crucial that we remember that the 'local' and the 'national' are not mutually exclusive. National and local concerns are intertwined, inseparable and interdependent. A strong attachment to one's locality is not antithetical to the development of shared class or political identities. The local provides spaces to perform as well as identities, customs and rituals that lend protest cultural and political legitimacy. It is only by acting through local spaces that national change can be both imagined and implemented.

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[87] Navickas, p. 8.