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CAPTAIN SWING AND RURAL POPULAR CONSCIOUSNESS: NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOUTHERN ENGLISH SOCIAL HISTORY IN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS
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This thesis considers the disturbances in the English countryside in 1830 – the so-called 'Captain Swing riots' – within their own social and cultural context. Despite the fact that they have attracted considerable academic interest over the years (not least from social historians) this aspect of the historiography remains incomplete. The underlying premise of this work is that the events of 1830 make no social or historical sense outside the cultural context within which they unfolded, and that a reliance solely on normative empirical sources is inadequate to illuminate this context.

The study itself is divided into three parts. The first is an investigation into the 'body language' of the Swing disturbances, an attempt to understand the behaviour of the Swing crowd or the lone arsonist as they may have understood it themselves. It is essentially an exercise in uncovering social meaning, placing the rich symbolism of the 'action' of Swing at the forefront of the historiography, according it a status equivalent to that more commonly applied to the major structural conditions affecting early-nineteenth century rural labourers.

The second is a much wider exploration of the cultural context of the disturbances, locating a coherent and sophisticated value-system in the popular culture of the rural labouring poor – and in particular, the ballads and songs of the first half of the nineteenth century – which in turn can be seen to have been applied during the disturbances of 1830.

The final part is an investigation into the place held by land in the consciousness of the rural labouring poor. It is argued that not only was the engrossment of land by farmers identified as the main obstacle to harmonious rural social relations but that a coherent alternative social model to that which existed as a result of engrossment was at work within rural popular consciousness by 1830. At the heart of this model was an understanding that in the countryside land was the most potent currency in social exchange: land made an occupier of a wage-slave, and the symbolism and iconography of land and the 'independence' it conferred is explored in the context of rural popular consciousness. Following on from this, and given that an explosion in allotment provision was the most substantial and lasting practical concession enjoyed by labourers following the Swing risings, a thorough revision of the historiography of early allotment provision is proposed which places it, symbolically and practically, at the heart of that popular consciousness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: Reading the 'Body Language' of Swing 5

i) Crowd Action and the 'Movement' of Swing 6

ii) Arson and Riot: the Two Faces of Swing 14

iii) Protest and Customary Consciousness 23

Chapter 2: Populism, Popular Culture and the Protocol of Swing 41

i) Reading Popular Culture 46

ii) 'The People's History' and the Constitution of Populism 51

iii) Songs and the Realisation of Populism 59

iv) Populism in Action 65

iv) i William Cobbett and Rural Populism 65

iv) ii Populism and the Wider Consensus 73

iv) iii The Withdrawal of the Farmer from the 'Everyday Feast' and the Breaking of the Social Compact 83

iv) iv Swing and the Social Agenda of the Labouring Poor 89

Chapter 3: Allotments, the 'Cottage Charter', and the Question of Land 100

i) The Psychological Impact of Changing Land Use 102

ii) The Historiography of Early Allotment Provision 106

iii) 'Land for Labourers': Allotments and the Rural Labouring Poor 120

iv) 'The Cottage Well-Thatched with Straw': Allotments and the 'Cottage Charter' 128

Conclusion 142

Appendix: Ballads and Songs of the Labouring Poor 147

Bibliography 164

INTRODUCTION

Jack Swing is the greatest Reformer,
The fellow what burns all the hay;
His reasons got warmer and warmer,
Till the Slaves of Corruption gave way.

Our tyrants have bred a fine fellow,
They have foster'd and reared Master Swing;-
But oh, how the wretches do bellow,
When fire-balls fly from his sling!

Yet "the Church" (so they tell us) "will smother,
"The fires that blaze all around;
"And a SPECIAL COMMISSION, her brother,
"Will hang every Swing that is found;

"And those who escape from the gallows,
"Will fall by a General Fast!"
And these are the means, which (they tell us)
Will master Jack Swing at the last!

Why, the brains of the tyrants are rotten,
As sure as Jack Swing is alive;
'Twas on fasting that Swing was begotten,
And on fasting he always will thrive.

But the Country news, every Post, is
The best that our wishes could bring;
That nought, but AGRARIAN JUSTICE,
Can kill that great Radical Swing.[1]

'Jack Swing' was clearly a versatile fellow; among contemporaries not only was he "the greatest Reformer", but he was an emissary from the revolutions in Europe, an "adept in chymical ignition"[2], a member of the Catholic Association[3], and a follower of William Cobbett. He was described by Edward Gibbon Wakefield, as a "defective being, with calfless legs and stooping shoulders, weak in body and mind, inert, pusillanimous, and stupid"[4]; according to others he had the appearance of a farmer and a gentleman.[5] Sometimes he sported "very large black whiskers", at other times they were red[6]; he drove a green gig or rode a "sorrel coloured…Blood Horse with a Switch Tail".[7] He was often spotted at the scene of an incendiary attack, yet never apprehended and rarely

[1] 'Jack Swing', anonymous song published in the *Poor Man's Guardian*, 2nd April 1831, p.8.
[2] P(ublic) R(ecord) O(ffice) HO44/22/245, Col. Henry Murray to Home Office, 20th November 1830.
[3] HO44/22/57, Anon to Home Office, 5th November 1830.
[4] E Gibbon Wakefield, *Swing Unmasked: or, the causes of rural incendiarism* (London 1831), p.9.
[5] PRO HO52/11/5, J P Bouverie to Home Office, (n.d.).
[6] PRO HO52/6/131, examination of Susan Day of Berkshire, 28th November 1830.
[7] PRO HO52/6/131, examination of Susan Day; W(iltshire) and S(windon) R(ecord) O(ffice) A1/740/4/1, Anon to Mr Wyndham, Barford St. Martin, 21st December 1830.

approached. Those who wrote the story the Swing disturbances at the time were clearly alive to the symbolic resonance and the dramatic potential of the events of 1830. But if contemporaries saw in 'Jack Swing' a cast of different characters, historians have been more unanimous.

The Swing riots have generated a considerable body of academic work since they spread like wildfire across the southern English counties in 1830. 'Swing studies' can probably be said to have begun in earnest with the Hammonds, whose account of the "Last Labourers' Revolt" remained the most significant commentary on the subject until E P Thompson took up the baton in 1963.[8] Since Hobsbawm and Rudé's eponymous 1968 study, no monograph, chapter or journal article which deals with social relations or living conditions in the nineteenth-century English countryside has been complete without significant reference to the disturbances, their causes and effects. This is as it should be. In terms of their scale and intensity it is difficult to think of another popular rising in the last 300 years which comes close to the events of 1830. They have been treated demographically, geographically, sociologically and politically; they have been considered from almost every historical angle. Yet despite this academic range 'Jack Swing' continues to emerge from the pages of these studies as a generic figure, a degraded and miserable rural proletarian disenfranchised by the processes of enclosure and engrossment and trapped in a cycle of poverty and underemployment by the structural forces governing late-Hanoverian agriculture. Consequently, the description of 'Jack Swing' and his actions during the disturbances of 1830 continues to be almost invariably framed within the terms of these structural conditions, and little account has been taken of the social and cultural backdrop to the disturbances.[9]

As contemporary commentators were only too aware, of course, there *was* no 'Jack Swing': rather, there was a multitude of Swings, Jack, John, Jacob and Isaac – even, on occasion, Judy – each with his or her discrete history and all of whom were linked by the hidden but invulnerable bonds of custom, culture and local social protocol. The purpose of this study is to make visible some of those hidden bonds; to show that there was a great deal more to the events of 1830 than the structural conditions of poverty, disenfranchisement and degradation alone will allow. For as E P Thompson once

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[8] J L and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (London 1911), Chapters 10 and 11, 'The Last Labourers' Revolt I & II'; E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1963), Chapter 7, 'The Field Labourers'.

[9] There are exceptions to this, the most notable of which is Bob Bushaway whose early work took as its starting point the thesis that "custom...established a cultural environment for more orthodox movements of

famously warned historians of the eighteenth century, relying solely on structural conditions when describing the behaviour of individuals and communities *in extremis*

> may conclude the investigation at the exact point at which it becomes of serious sociological or cultural interest: being hungry, what do people do? How is their behaviour modified by custom, culture and reason? And (having granted that the primary stimulus of 'distress' is present) does their behaviour contribute towards any more complex, culturally-mediated function, which cannot be reduced – however long it is stewed over the fires of statistical analysis – back to stimulus again.[10]

Chapter 1 is a direct exploration of how the behaviour of the Swing crowds was "modified by custom, culture and reason". Taking as its starting point the truism that ordinary people rarely leave significant accounts of themselves in the records, it is an investigation into the 'body language' of the Swing crowds, an attempt to extrapolate from the customary norms and protocols employed by them some of the wider meanings that their actions may have held for the members of those crowds within their own customary and cultural context. Chapter 2 moves on to explore the cultural context of the disturbances in greater detail, arguing that a thorough understanding of the interplay between culture and consciousness is necessary to any understanding of popular collective action. Through an inter-textual reading of rural ballads and songs alongside more normative empirical sources, it is proposed that it is possible to locate the operation of a set of values which together made up a coherent world-view among the labouring poor and which can, on closer examination, be seen to have been applied during the peculiar conditions of Swing. Further, it is suggested that inherent in this world-view was a sophisticated and ideologically far-reaching critique of rural social relations in southern England. Among other things, it is argued that the changing nature of land ownership, tenure and accessibility was central to this critique, and Chapter 3 moves on to investigate one important and neglected aspect of this; the explosion in the provision of small to moderately sized allotments of land for labourers after 1830. Bringing together the themes and methods explored in Chapters 1 and 2, Chapter 3 suggests that the historiographical explanations so far advanced for this phenomenon are thoroughly inadequate to explain it when taking account of the actual social and cultural context within which this land was allotted and received. The reasons why this should be the case are explored in detail, and it is further proposed that within the popular consciousness of the labouring poor these allotments held a far greater symbolic significance than has so far been allowed.

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social protest". B Bushaway, *By Rite* (London 1982), pp.1-2.

[10] E P Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century' in *Customs in*

My thanks are due to the staff of many library and archive collections, most notably the Special Collections Department at the University of Southampton's Hartley Library; Hampshire, Swindon and Wiltshire, and Dorset Record Offices; the Public Record Office at Kew; and Manchester Central Reference Library's Language and Literature Department. My delight at having been significantly distracted from studying by the birth and early months of my son Dylan cannot go unexpressed, and neither can my enormous debt of gratitude to Karen, my wife. Finally, I would like to convey my sincere appreciation to John Rule, my supervisor, whose input has been invaluable and whose encouragement has been consistent throughout.

Common (London 1991), p.187.

CHAPTER 1: Reading the 'Body Language' of Swing

One of the most fundamental and vexed questions thrown up by events in the countryside in the second half of 1830 is how far did they constitute a 'movement' of the agricultural labourers? In other words, to what degree was the multitude of discrete 'events' that made up the Swing risings, when taken as a whole, the expression of a shared consciousness, consciously applied to a set of identifiable objectives? Generally, historians have tended to follow Hobsbawm and Rudé's formidable lead in concluding that the events of Swing were simply the "improvised, archaic, spontaneous movements of resistance to the full triumph of rural capitalism". Roger Wells, for example, suggests that Swing "conformed to the precedents set thirty to forty years previously"; in other words that it should be located firmly within the tradition of the local, spontaneous food riots of the late eighteenth century, and that as a result "it was the intensity and the scale which made the Swing revolt the greatest rural rebellion since the sixteenth century...*not the nature of the protest*" (my emphasis). David Kent echoes this when he says "there was nothing mysterious about the causes of the Swing disturbances. They stemmed from the grinding poverty which faced most agricultural workers in southern England". Even E P Thompson describes them as "curiously indecisive and unbloodthirsty".[1]

Clearly, account must be taken of such assessments: the risings simply cannot be interpreted outside of a thorough understanding of the immiseration and poverty of those who took part in them; certainly, they often echoed earlier forms of protest in their use of arson and 'collective bargaining by riot'; and the evidence does indeed point to the fact that the 'mobs' who perpetrated the protests were largely "unbloodthirsty" (although when we look closer we might wish to revise the historical judgement that they were "indecisive"). But despite such evidence, these and other historians' assessments of the events of Swing as spontaneous, anachronistic and improvised provide little insight into the reasons why the events occurred exactly as they did, in exactly the historical and geographical locations where they did. The similarities between the various discrete 'events' are striking; we shall see the way in which, as they unfolded across southern and central England, the same targets, the same demands and methods were repeated time and

[1] E J Hobsbawm & G Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London 1969), p.12; R Wells, 'The development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest, 1700-1850' in M Reed and R Wells (eds.), *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1800* (London 1990), p.30; D Kent, *Popular Radicalism and the Swing Riots in Central Hampshire* (Winchester 1997), p.1; E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (2nd. edn., London 1968) p.250.

again, always modified for the particular local conditions where they took place. The assumption that each fire, each 'mobbing' and each demonstration was simply the act of an isolated and impoverished community – sparked into action by the proximity of other, similar events, but spontaneous, 'improvised' and *entirely* local nonetheless – is thoroughly inadequate, I would suggest, to explain the true phenomenon of Swing. As we have already noted, E P Thompson famously issued an injunction to historians of the eighteenth century to beware the vice of crude reductionism, arguing that it simply is not enough to attribute riots and crowd action to 'hunger' and then proceed descriptively as though a full explanation is in place. I would suggest that we need to look again at the early nineteenth century, and particularly at the Swing disturbances, with this injunction firmly in mind.[2]

i) Crowd Action and the 'Movement' of Swing

Many contemporaries expressed the opinion (or at least the fear) that Swing was indeed a movement, internally coherent, with a hidden agenda, and closely co-ordinated by shadowy agents behind the scenes. At the height of the troubles in Hampshire, a correspondent to the county Sheriff, Colonel George Purefoy Jervoise, wrote: "we used to talk of the outrages in Ireland – a lawless country – why the very same things are doing close to London...if such is our present condition after a very fair harvest and with the season favourable in many respects, we must conclude that the people are discontented by agency for concealed purposes"[3]; another was unable to "divest myself of the fear that there is some secret engine at work that has not yet been discovered". These gentleman and others were undoubtedly stirred in their theories of conspiracy by the proximity of the disturbances to the revolutionary events in Belgium and France, and at times this was explicitly acknowledged: "I hope that you are quiet in Hants as we are here," wrote another of Col. Jervoise's correspondents, "but I am afraid the grand armies of France will not be contented with mere parade".[4] In reply to the 'Rural Queries' of the 1834 Poor Law Commissioners as much as two years after the events of 1830, respondents still insisted that among the main causes was a "[g]eneral excitement by the example of

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[2] See above, p.3.

[3] H(ampshire) R(ecord) O(ffice) 44 M69/96/2/1/38, J Fitzgerald to G P Jervoise, 27th November 1830. The fact that the this correspondent talks of 1830 being a year of good harvest is itself interesting: in fact, "1828 to 1830 produced three wet summers in a row with poor harvests, and in 1830-31 appeared the most serious outbreak of sheep rot of the whole century apart from those of 1879-80" . Chambers and Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880* (London 1966), p.128.

successful insurrection in France and Belgium", and that "[t]he commencement of the Fires, I always fancied, [was] aided by emissaries from France or Ireland".[5] In much the same vein, the national press faithfully reported first-hand accounts suggesting that the fires were often incited, and even ignited, by "strangers", "gentlemanly-looking men". *The Morning Chronicle* reported from Bedfont, Middlesex, that

> On Tuesday afternoon last, about two o'clock, it is said that two respectably dressed men, who were travelling in a barouche, stopped a boy in the road, and one of them said; 'Who is your Master, Boy?' The boy replied, 'Master Sherwin, Sir.' 'Oh, tell him to keep a look out.' And then drove on...About ten o'clock, however, the same night, his two barns, several outhouses and stabling were discovered to be on fire.

The readers of the *Chronicle* were left to draw their own conclusions about the true identity of these 'respectably dressed men'.[6] Some aimed to indict the political enemies of authority at its heart, London Radicals, and at times it seemed as though they carried considerable weight with even the highest authorities. A correspondent of Robert Peel wrote that

> The incendiaries are undoubtedly, as you stated the other night, men whose gentlemanly appearance lulls suspicion. Sir these men evidently are none of the tenantry neither can they be at all connected with the places of their depredations but in my opinion come from London & after their end is effected immediately proceed back to London.

Elsewhere, witnesses from across the south of England pointed with a remarkable degree of consistency to the mysterious and sinister appearance close to incidences of arson of two men, one "about 5 feet 10 in. high, sandy whiskers, large red nose, apparently between 50 and 60 years of age", and the other "apparently about 5 feet 4 inches, and between 30 and 40 years of age". This description comes from a handbill posted at Pampisford in Cambridgeshire, but it is closely echoed by other descriptions from Berkshire, Wiltshire and Devon. In Essex, yet another account of "a large stout man with red whiskers" and his "smaller" companion prompted the Home Secretary to request that information on the pair be disseminated in the area, and that a £100 reward be offered for their apprehension.[7] In the event, the appeal was unsuccessful: no such figures were apprehended and it would seem that the numerous sightings of them was merely a case of the successful dissemination of an urban (or perhaps rural) myth. Despite the widespread currency of these theories of foreign incitement and shadowy conspiracy, it

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[4] F J Egerton to G P Jervoise, 30th November 1830; J Croft to G P Jervoise, 8th December 1830.

[5] *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws* 1834, Appendix B(1) 'Answers to Rural Queries in Five Parts'; Part V, pp.23, 125.

[6] *The Times*, 4th December 1830 and *Reading Mercury*, 22nd November 1830, quoted in Hobsbawn and Rudé, pp.239-40; *The Morning Chronicle*, 11th November 1830.

[7] PRO HO52/6/408, handbill from Pampisford, Cambs. (n.d.); PRO HO52/6/128, deposition of Richard Jordan of Langeat, 23rd November 1830; PRO HO52/11/5, J P Bouverie to Sir Robert Peel (n.d.); HO 52/9/593, handbill from Honiton, Devon dated 26th November 1830; PRO HO 52/6/373, R G Ward to Home Office, 8th December 1830.

was privately acknowledged by officials that the burning of ricks was not the work of Radicals, nor of 'gentleman outsiders' of whatever persuasion. The Police Officer for the County Fire Office in London concluded that "in almost every instance, wherein conviction has taken place, the culprit has been a servant of the sufferer or person living near to him, acting under some motive of revenge".[8]

William Cobbett was many contemporaries' best bet for the real 'Captain Swing'. They feared his influence with rural labourers – through the *Political Register* and *Two-Penny Trash*, as well as his tours and lectures in the southern counties during the tumultuous months of 1830 – and he was, of course, famously acquitted of seditious libel at the Old Bailey in 1831, a charge arising from his alleged incitement of the labourers during the disturbances. Again, respondents to the 1834 Poor Law Commissioners explicitly linked Cobbett to the disturbances, naming him a dozen times as a major influence on the labourers' disposition to 'riot' or commit arson.[9] But Cobbett himself (who is often accused of being short on humility and long on self-esteem) refused to claim any part in the risings. Of the influence of shadowy outsiders, and specifically that of London Radicals, he wrote:

> Men that talk very much are apt to do very little; and I, if I had ricks and barns at stake, I should be more afraid of the vengeful feelings of one single labourer, whose son or brother I had caused to be imprisoned or severely dealt with for poaching, than I should be of the speeches, the writings, and the machinations of all the discontented spirits in London, who, besides all the rest, hardly know wheat from peas when they see them growing, hardly know a rick from a barn; and certainly do not know a barn from a stable; are totally ignorant of the state of homesteads and of the means of assailing them; [and] would be frightened out of their wits at the idea of going along a dark lane or over a down by themselves.

Cobbett knew the labourers well. He was the chronicler of their distress, and he was at pains to give credit for the actions of Swing to the labourers themselves:

> So loth are you to acknowledge; so loth are the land-owners, the parsons, the bull-frog farmers, aye, and the debt-owners too; so loth are you all to acknowledge that these fires have proceeded purely from the minds of the labourers, that you all still cling to this monstrous idea of extraneous instigation.[10]

There is, of course, much more to say on the subject of William Cobbett and his influence with the 'chopsticks', his affectionate name for agricultural labourers; but it is sufficient at this point merely to recognise that the figure who contemporaries and many historians have regarded as being as close in sentiment and understanding to the agricultural labourers as it's possible for an outsider to be, clearly felt that it was they themselves who

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[8] PRO HO22/44/270, James Davis to Sir Robert Peel, 22nd November 1830; PRO HO 40/25, fos. 904-5 (24th December 1830), quoted in Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Op. Cit.*, p.240.

[9] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix B(1), 'Answers to Rural Queries in Five Parts', pp. 192, 268, 281, 319, 334, 477, 478, 494, 398, 503, 506, 530.

[10] William Cobbett, *Two-Penny Trash*, V.1(8), February 1831.

were the sole moving force behind the events of 1830.

If 'outsiders' – London Radicals or agents from abroad – were not to blame for inciting the fires and 'riots' sweeping the country, if even the vainglorious Mr Cobbett refused to take the credit, then perhaps the cohesive ingredient was to be found closer to home, in the presence of local Radicals or 'village Hampdens'. Much was made at the time, and has been made subsequently, of the influence of radical sympathisers in the events, particularly in West Sussex and Hampshire.[11] Richard Pollen, Chairman of the Quarter Sessions and a juror at the Special Commission at Winchester which tried many of those involved in the risings, paid close attention to such figures. David Kent suggests that he "was particularly alarmed by the labourers' 'mode of combining' which he had thought was limited to the 'Manufacturing Classes'," and he "directed the magistrates' attention to [Radicals and leaders] and recommended that they be 'selected' for prosecution".[12] One notable case of this 'selection' was that of the Mason brothers of Bullington, in the Dever valley in Hampshire. Robert and Joseph Mason were day labourers who in their spare time worked 3½ acres of rented land, keeping a cow and growing wheat, potatoes and peas. They lived with Joseph's wife and daughter and their widowed mother, Mary. They were both highly literate and well-versed in scripture; Mary Mason at one time ran a Dame School and she had taught her sons well.

The Masons were involved in a well-documented rising which took place around Micheldever on the 19th of November 1830. Early that Friday morning the curate of Stoke Charity, the Revd. Cockerton, encountered a group of around 80 men on the Wonston road who told him they were on the way to break up the threshing machines there, but assured him they had no violent intent. They asked him for money to finance their expedition but he refused and tried unsuccessfully to dissuade them from continuing. Shortly after, a crowd about 100 strong arrived at Borough Farm, Micheldever, where they informed the farmer, William Paine, that they were going to break his machinery and that they wanted an increase of wages to 2 shillings a day. Paine agreed to the wage increase and sealed the agreement with beer, which he provided. But he was unable to persuade the men not to break his threshing machines. Later in the day the growing crowd visited other farmers and landowners in the vicinity breaking machines and demanding a rise in wages. They also enforced 'levies' from farmers and others locally who were in a position of authority or status. Farmers Paine and Richard

[11] See especially R Wells, 'Mr. William Cobbett, Captain Swing, and King William IV' in *Agricultural History Review*, no.45, pt.1 (1997), and D Kent, *op. cit.*

Deare gave £1 each, while Thomas Dowden, being of greater wealth, gave £2. Francis Callendar, Sir Thomas Baring's steward at East Stratton, eventually gave the crowd £10, though under considerable duress. The Revd. James Joliffe of Sutton Scotney pleaded poverty, but was eventually persuaded to part with 5 shillings. Eventually the crowd, by now 800 to 1,000 strong, moved on to Northington Farm where they were confronted by William Bingham Baring, Sir Thomas's nephew. During a scuffle, Bingham Baring was assaulted by a young labourer, Henry Cook, who struck him with a sledge hammer.[13] Though his wounds were not life threatening (and though Cobbett later asserted that Cook had done him "no bodily harm") they were sufficient to lay him low for a few days. On the 21st of November, Bingham Baring reported to his wife, Harriet, that "I am well from my wound and shall eat to day for the first time". By Monday the 22nd of November he was able to write that he was "so much better that I patrolled the rick yards and walked over with Francis [his cousin] to see whether Pikes was closed".[14] Cook, on the other hand, was later convicted by the Special Commission (on which was serving Bingham's uncle, Sir Thomas) and hanged for assault, one of only two capital casualties of the disturbances in Hampshire.

Robert and Joseph Mason were also convicted at the Special Commission for their part in the rising, Robert for being among the crowd that coerced five shillings from the Revd. Joliffe, and Joseph for being party to the 'robbery' of farmer Thomas Dowden. For these crimes they were transported to Australia, Joseph for life. We know that the authorities went out of their way to convict them, and it has been suggested that this was because of their radical sympathies and membership of a 'Music and Radical' club in Sutton Scotney. Only a month before the events around Micheldever Joseph set out to deliver a petition to the King at Brighton. The petition was an expression of the distress of agricultural labourers and requested the King's influence to effect parliamentary reform. It was signed by 176 village workers from the parishes around Bullington. Joseph walked 60 miles to deliver the petition to the King, whereupon he was turned away with the advice that it should have been directed to the Home Office. Dispirited and without further funds, he gave the petition to an acquaintance for safekeeping and eventually it found its way into the possession of none other than William Cobbett, who

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[12] Kent, p.15.
[13] For a full account of the events around Micheldever see Kent, pp.8-14, and especially A M Colson, 'Revolt of the Hampshire Agricultural Labourers and its Causes', p.144.
[14] *Political Register*, 14th July 1832, p.85; HRO 100M70/F1&F2, William Bingham Baring to Harriet baring, 21st and 25th November 1830.

later published an account of it in *Two-Penny Trash.*[15] We know that the authorities were aware of the Masons' activities with the 'Music and Radical' club, and we also know they were aware of the petition. In fact, Captain John Thompson, a Home Office correspondent, had warned that for some time the brothers were "actively employed in sowing the seeds of disaffection in...the neighbouring villages" and he claimed to have evidence that they had been "at one of the new beer houses with an assemblage of persons of different ranks...listening to speeches and signing a petition to the King".[16]

David Kent has shown how the Special Commission attempted unsuccessfully to convict Joseph of the robbery of Francis Callendar before doing so for the robbery of Thomas Dowden; with Robert, two unsuccessful attempts were made before a charge was found that would stick. In neither case was any evidence offered that the Masons had actually orchestrated the crowd in the robberies; rather, they were eventually convicted on the dubious legal formality that a felony committed by one person in a crowd made all other members of that crowd liable for it. However, despite this it was clearly felt by the judges and jurors of the Commission that they *must* have been at the front of the crowd, and they made this clear in their submissions. Cobbett reported how the Attorney General spoke to the Commission of the Masons' "superior education and intelligence", and Baron Vaughan, presiding, hinted at the way in which "evil designing persons" of higher station had led the labourers astray. He later intimated that Robert and Joseph had no place in the 'rioting' crowd because they were "in a better condition in life" than most of the others. Clearly, despite a lack of evidence the jurors and commissioners at Winchester were anxious to demonstrate that the Masons were at the heart of a nest of Radical conspirators whose aim it was to stir the 'poor labourers' to ill-conceived actions for their own political ends. With characteristic humility, Cobbett suggested in *Two-Penny Trash* that the Masons

> worked for the neighbouring farmers; earned their money by very hard labour; were perfectly sober and honest men, and an example in these respects to the whole country round about; but, it was proved that they read COBBETT'S REGISTER, and COBBETT'S HISTORY OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION; and they were condemned to death [later commuted to transportation].[17]

In fact, evidence of a conspiracy in the Masons' case *does* exist, though not the kind that the Commission would necessarily have wanted to come to light. In the postscript to a letter sent from his cell in Winchester prison, Robert Mason suggested that his prosecutor, the Revd. James Joliffe, had not acted alone in the matter. "I saw Jas.

[15] *Two-Penny Trash*, V.2(8), July 1832.
[16] Kent, p.16.

Diddams last week," he writes, "and he told me that you prosecuted me because Thos. Baring in a manner compelled you". This was later confirmed by Joliffe in person, as Robert informed his mother:

> Jas. Diddams called on us last week with a message from Mr Joliffe to know if it would be agreeable for him to call on me. That what had happened, and the injury done me was not from him but he was obliged to say what he did for Sir Thos. Baring had compelled him to appear and he likewise said that, as far as he could, he would be a friend to you. Therefore I would salute him as a friend, not that he will do you much good, but by treating him thus it will heap coals of fire on his head.[18]

Sir Thomas was a considerable figure in Hampshire, and his influence didn't end at the county boundaries. One half of the Baring banking dynasty, he was immensely wealthy, an MP and one-time Deputy Lieutenant of Hampshire. The Duc de Richelieu once quipped, "there are six great powers in Europe: France, Russia, Austria, Prussia and the Baring Brothers".[19] It was hardly surprising, then, that he was able to exercise such a degree of influence over the reluctant Revd. Joliffe. But the conspiracy didn't end there. As we have seen, the Reverend Cockerton, rector of Stoke Charity, was the first to be accosted by the crowd on the 19th of November, and he also lent considerable support to the campaign to convict the Masons for incitement, explicitly linking their membership of the Radical club, and the tenor of its meetings, with their participation in the Micheldever risings. In a letter of advice to Sir Thomas on the eve of the Winchester trials, he suggested that one witness should be asked

> which Mason said 'you would not have believed a week ago <u>we</u> could have done what <u>we</u> have, <u>we</u> can do more yet' – or like words. Ask if Robt. Mason did not say <u>he</u> was satisfied with the acct. given of the breaking up of Wm. Wickham's machines and that <u>he</u> would go on to Sutton to stop the men from coming down to smash it. Ask if he did not act as leader when he held up his staff and <u>commanded</u> silence.

Later in the same letter, Cockerton reminds Sir Thomas that "meetings have been held at the Swan Inn Sutton kept by David Diggins – he and his wife may be able to give evidence respecting the meetings".[20]

Clearly, conspiracy and political machinations *were* evident beneath the surface of Swing. But despite the fact that known radical sympathisers took part in the risings the real conspiracy was that undertaken by the authorities to convict them as orchestrators and ringleaders. Indeed, it is unthinkable that they would not have been active in the protests given the social and political climate, the proximity of the revolutions in Belgium

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[17] *Two-Penny Trash*, V.1(6), December 1830.
[18] HRO 92M95/F2/8/4&6, Robert Mason to Revd. J Joliffe, 27th January 1831; Robert Mason to Mary Mason, 6th February 1831.
[19] Duc de Richelieu, quoted in M Bowen, *Peter Porcupine: a study of William Cobbett* (London 1935), p.236.
[20] HRO 92M95/F2/8/3, Revd. D Cockerton to Sir Thomas Baring, 2nd December 1830.

and France, and the mounting campaign for a fundamental reform of parliament. But, as the Special Commission at Winchester found in its efforts to convict the Mason brothers, the evidence simply does not exist that Swing was a movement designed, instigated or, on the whole, led by Radicals. The Reverend Cockerton explicitly acknowledged, in his letter to Sir Thomas Baring, that the most likely radical ringleader of the crowd on November 19th in fact took no significant part in the disturbances: "Enos Diddams (an old radical)," he explained, "has attended the meetings but as I have told you, he has behaved well in the riots". Diddams, a shoemaker and regular correspondent with William Cobbett, was one of the leading lights in the Sutton Scotney Radical and Music club, and was instrumental in the crafting of the October petition to the King. The conscientious Cockerton finished by reluctantly acknowledging, "it does not I think appear that the meetings had any thing immediately to do with the rising".[21]

And so we return to the original question: how far did the events of 1830 constitute a 'movement' of the agricultural labourers? If they were not orchestrated by 'foreigners' then perhaps it was the work of London Radicals; if not these then surely the redoubtable William Cobbett was to blame; if Cobbett wasn't the motivating force then it must have been the work of his acolytes, country radicals, 'village Hampdens'. If none of these was the primary force behind the risings, then what are we left with? Only the 'poor labourers' themselves, the "pre-political" poor whose "ideological resources" consisted of "the belief in the rights of poor men by custom".[22] And this, I would suggest, is a poor return indeed for many historians of Swing, because for them it represents no 'movement' at all. Rather, it is the 'last rising' of a ragged and demoralised rural proletariat whose language was the archaic and outmoded language of custom and whose allegiances were to a set of precepts which belonged to the eighteenth century, not the new 'reality' of the market-driven nineteenth. The point at issue, though, is not whether the agricultural labourers of 1830 were or were not highly politicised in a radical sense, nor whether they were motivated by anything other than the "belief in the rights of poor men by custom". The point at issue is whether or not this belief in custom, the customs themselves, were somehow anachronistic and inappropriate in the increasingly capitalised world of late-Hanoverian agriculture. The question is essentially the same as that posed at the beginning of this chapter: to what degree was the multitude of discrete 'events' that made up the Swing risings, when taken as a whole, the expression of a

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[21] HRO 92M95/F2/8/3, Revd. D Cockerton to Sir Thomas Baring, 2nd December 1830.
[22] Hobsbawm and Rudé, p.43.

shared consciousness, consciously applied to a set of identifiable objectives? How far can a *consciousness* – not necessarily a 'modern' political consciousness, nor even the consciousness of class, but a shared, coherent consciousness nonetheless – be identified across the whole landscape of the 1830 risings?

ii) Arson and Riot: the Two Faces of Swing

One of the biggest problems in assessing the consciousness of the Swing crowd is that there was not one, but two Captain Swings. One was Swing the 'rioter', who patrolled the country lanes with his band of labourers, pikes and pitchforks in hand. This is the Swing who sought to enforce customary norms, a return to threshing by hand and a living wage, and this is the Swing on which the present work will concentrate most fully. The other was the Swing most readily recognised by contemporaries, Swing the rick-burner. He it was who captured most of the headlines and much of the public's imagination; he was the one they feared most and it's easy to see why in the context of the time. Arson in the countryside was the most damaging, and by far the easiest crime against property to perpetrate. In his reasoned assessment of the severe outbreak of arson in 1822, Cobbett maintained that

> the hirelings of the Borough-system talk only of the *crime*; the wickedness of the *crime*; the *vengeance* to be inflicted on the offenders; and, by no means, ever one word about the *cause* of the commission of the crime...The main cause, doubtless, is *unsatisfied hunger*. There are several others. There is a long arrear of soreness and sourness.

Despite his clear allegiance, though, even Cobbett, champion of the 'chopsticks', was under no illusions that arson was

> very horrible: it makes one shudder to think of it; here is a *great crime*, not only in the eye of the *law* (for that, in such case, is little), but, in the more steady and awe-inspiring eye of *natural justice*. Next to wilful murder this is the greatest of human offences.

By 1830, with the invention of the Lucifer match, this "great crime" had just got a lot easier to perpetrate as well.[23] At the time, the two Swings were often quite separate in the public mind. We've already seen how the press faithfully reported accounts of 'outsiders' – gentlemen in a barouche, strangers in a green gig – who were supposed to have incited and even ignited the fires. Rarely do we find concomitant reports of shadowy outsiders instigating the labourers to riot. As we shall see, such 'mobbing' crowds were uniformly reported as consisting of local labourers, artisans and shopkeepers (local to the parish, that is, and occasionally from nearby towns and villages). Where

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[23] *Political Register*, 20th April 1822, pp.19-21; J E Archer, 'The Wells-Charlesworth Debate: A Personal Comment on Arson in Norfolk and Suffolk' in Mick Reed and Roger Wells (eds.), p.84.

contemporaries *did* seek to implicate 'strangers' and outsiders as instigators in crowd action their rhetoric was usually aimed at distantly malign forces (the example of the French, the Radical press, and of course Cobbett himself), not at individuals directly involved in the action.

One obvious explanation for this dichotomy in the public mind is simple visibility: the crowds who marched or processioned from threshing machine to threshing machine and from farm to farm were easily identified; the arsonist was of necessity a hidden and shadowy character. Targets of the former were in a position, if not to identify each member of the group, then at least to assess for themselves the constitution of that group in the broadest sense. Targets of the latter, however, were in no such advantageous position, and as a result incendiaries were particularly well-suited to fit whatever shape came to the public mind. In the politically charged atmosphere of 1830 this often resembled a designing but gentlemanly Radical – the *bête noire* of the establishment press – or a foreign emissary, sent to spread the disease of revolution in the English countryside. Sometimes, it was simply inconceivable to a farmer or a landowner that the 'peasants' of his own country – his workmen, *his* labourers – could be so dastardly and disloyal as to ignite his ricks and barns and put his life in danger. "Acts of incendiarism were rare in the immediate neighbourhood," wrote the Rector of Hailsbury Bryan in Dorset, "and in general neither the Poor nor the Farmers were willing to believe that the fires were lighted by English Labourers". Sir Edward Knatchbull seemed to confirm this from the very heart of the conflagrations when he reported to the East Kent Sessions on the 30th October 1830 that "it was a species of consolation, that the great number, *and a great number there were, Heaven knew*, who had engaged in the breaking of machines, felt the same abhorrence as [the magistrates] of the burnings".[24] He was, of course, quite wrong. There were many reports of labourers refusing to assist in the extinguishing of fires, such as at Briston in Norfolk where the Overseer's barley stacks were targeted. "Although some of the labouring classes who had assembled lent their assistance, the majority stood looking on in sullen silence," reported the *Norwich Mercury*.

> When asked "Why don't you help and try to save the property, and put the fire out?" they answered "What is the use of our assisting? Whether it is burned or not, it makes no difference to us – we are as badly off as we can be, and it is impossible for us to be worse; therefore it may take its chance".

At times, their refusal to assist took an even more active turn. At Englefield Green near Windsor the Right Hon. W H Freemantle's barn containing upwards of 50 loads of hay

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[24] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws,* Appendix B(1) 'Answers to Rural Queries in

was set on fire and engines were summoned from as far afield as Enfield and Staines. However, the firemen's endeavours were severely hampered when the engine's pipes were cut with a knife by an unknown assailant.[25] Cobbett had, of course, cautioned against relying on the goodwill and loyalty of the labourers as early as 1824. "It is well known," he wrote,

> that, generally speaking, your labourers hate you as they hate toads and adders. They regard you as their deadly enemies; as those who robbed them of their food and raiment, and who trample on them and insult them in their state of weakness, and they detest you accordingly. I know that there are many exceptions amongst you; but, pretty generally speaking, force, and force alone, keeps them in subjection to you. They, as you well know, have their thoughts directed towards the BARRACKS! You, as well as they, know what those barracks contain.[26]

In the event, of course, the labourers did not resort to the barracks: with tinder box and flint and the new Lucifer match they had no need to. As Cobbett predicted and as The Police Officer for the London County Fire Office confirmed[27], those few incendiaries who were apprehended in 1830 were almost exclusively local labourers, known and probably once employed by the victim.

It is, of course, well nigh impossible to assess the exact motivation of the arsonist; his crime was (and is) defined by anonymity and usually, though not exclusively, he declined to give any hint of the reasoning behind his actions. Thus, the actual relationship between Swing the arsonist and Swing the 'rioter' is problematic. That such a relationship existed, however, is not at issue. After all the fires in Kent in June and July 1830 were in effect the flame that lit the touchpaper of Swing, but it was only after two months of these fires, according to Hobsbawm and Rudé, that the first threshing machine was destroyed, at Lower Hardres, Kent, on the 28th of August.[28] Thereafter, the fires illuminated Swing's progress through the southern and central counties and intensified wherever the 'rioters' and machine breakers touched down. A correspondent to the Home Office at the height of the disturbances confirmed this relationship with a deft piece of logic. "It has been publicly stated both in and out of Parliament," he wrote, "that the incendiaries and machine breakers belonged to two distinct classes of persons".

> Now it appears to me that so far from this being the case, the direct contrary is the

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Five Parts', p.141; *Political Register*, 30th November 1830.

[25] *Norwich Mercury* quoted in the *Political Register*, 20th November 1830, p.792; *Windsor Express* quoted in the *Morning Chronicle*, 12th November 1830.

[26] *Political Register*, 11th September 1823, pp.671-2.

[27] See above, p.8.

[28] Hobsbawm and Rudé, p.97. Though this has recently been disputed by Carl Griffin, who suggests that "the first act of organised machine-breaking occurred on the night of 24 August at Wingmore Court, on the border between Barham and Elham" in Kent. See C Griffin, ''There was no law to punish that offence'. Reassessing 'Captain Swing': Rural Luddism and Rebellion in East Kent, 1830-31' in *Southern History*, 22 (2000), p.140.

> fact...From what cause has it proceeded beyond a turn out of the agricultural population for an encrease [*sic*] of wages accompanied by threats, either personal or by letter, to enforce their demands? And have not these threatening letters been almost universally of the same tenor? Viz: that if the person addressed did not agree to the terms proposed he should hear more of 'Swing' – which threat be it observed has been followed up by the breaking of a machine or the burning of a stack, according to the facilities afforded by the particular situation of the farmer. Now were it the object of the incendiary simply to inspire terror and create a distrust towards the Govt. it seems to me that his intention would be best fulfilled by firing stacks and houses without any previous warning whatever; but in all the letters which have come under my observation the similarity of the noticis [*sic*] strongly marks the identity of the parties concerned.[29]

Perhaps we should follow this concerned citizen's lead in assessing the relationship between the rick burner and the 'rioter'; perhaps the suggestion of two Swings is misleading. We may be better advised to view Swing as a Janus-faced figure, possessing two apparently discrete aspects but in fact expressing two sides of the same popular consciousness. Swing the 'rioter' was the bold public face of the movement, the expression of public will, the negotiator. Swing the arsonist, on the other hand, was a mysterious and malign face: he was as elusive as he was impossible to guard against; he could strike anywhere and at any time; he was the movement's enforcer. "There was very little danger," wrote Cobbett, "in the machine-breaking, and the sturdy begging, or rioting and robbing, if it must be so called. These would be effectually put a stop to by the transportings and hangings; but as to the fires it was quite another matter".[30]

Arson, then, was an incredibly potent tool for the followers of Swing. Yet despite the undoubted power that arson held over the public mind, in the normal run of things it was more often than not an expression, or at least an inadvertent admission, of the *powerlessness* of labourers in the countryside. To paraphrase E P Thompson's assessment of anonymous threatening letters, on the perpetrator's side arson "is a characteristic form of social protest in any society...in which individuals who can be identified as the organizers of protest are liable to immediate victimization", and this is borne out by a breakdown of those brought before the Winchester Special Assizes: 258 prisoners tried; 125 for extorting money, 95 for breaking machinery, 65 for assorted crimes relating to 'riot' and disorder, *none for arson.*[31] Before, during and after the period of Swing, there is no doubt that arson was a tool employed to many ends, including the redress of personal grievances against individuals. Certainly, as David Jones and John Archer have shown, these personal grievances would often have coincided with the shared grievances of the wider community, and indeed this sense of shared grievance was probably vital for

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[29] PRO HO44/22/374-5, 'A Well Wisher to my Country' to the Home Office, 30th November 1830.
[30] Cobbett, *Two-Penny Trash*, V.1(8), February 1831.
[31] Hobsbawm and Rudé, p.258.

the protection of the actual perpetrator of the fire.[32] But it cannot be denied that in the wider context arson was most often an act of closure, a desperate act, and one which was redolent of the frustration of all other attempts to achieve redress for grievance. Arson, once perpetrated, could not be undone: it was not normally, and could not normally have been, an act of leverage between two negotiating parties. But the period of the Swing risings was not at all 'normal', and as Roger Wells has pointed out the sheer scale of the events was one of its most striking features. Perhaps under such peculiar conditions we should take time to look more closely at the events themselves and at their symbolic meanings.

There is no doubt that most acts of arson within the overall context of Swing were not simply the expression of a dismissed employee or the family of a young labourer convicted of poaching. However, even if such a grievance *was* the initial spur to action, during the tumult of late 1830 the act itself could not but have held a much wider symbolic significance for the enemies of Swing as well as the constituents of the Swing crowds, the labourers themselves. It has already been suggested there is clear evidence of an overlap between the 'rioting' crowds and the lone incendiarists, and this is confirmed by the anonymous letters sent by Swing to his enemies and intended victims. "This is to inform you," runs one such letter, "what you have to undergo gentlemen if providing you dont pull down your [m]eshenes and rise the poor mens wages the maried men give tow and six pence a day a day [*sic*] the singel tow shilings or we will burn down your barns and you in them this is the last notis".[33] Elsewhere, the threat of arson was explicitly used by 'rioting' crowds to strengthen their demands. One such case was that of James Annalls of Chilbolton, Hampshire, who was sentenced to death (later commuted to transportation for life) for his part in the 'robbery' of William Courtney of Barton Stacey. In sentencing Annalls, Baron Vaughan had no doubt of the gravity of the threat, as he was at pains to make clear:

> That which I put my hand on in your case, and that for which you are selected to suffer, is your threat that there would be a fire in the neighbourhood, and your intimation to Mr. Courtney, to look over the hills at Barton Stacey for a light, at a moment when there was no light, and when, if there had been a light, he must have seen it. If no fire had followed in the direction to which you pointed, it might have been considered that the threat in question was an idle threat on your part. But unfortunately your prediction was fulfilled. In less than two hours and a half from the time at which you spoke, there was on the premises of Sir H. W. Wilson, and in the very direction to which you pointed, a fire; and a circumstance like that leads to something more than suspicion, that though yours might not be the hand

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[32] See D Jones, 'Thomas Campbell Foster and the Rural Labourer: Incendiarism in East Anglia in the 1840s in *Social History*, V.1(1) (January 1976); J Archer, *'By a Flash and a Scare': Arson, Animal Maiming and Poaching in East Anglia, 1815-1870* (Oxford 1990).

[33] Quoted in Hobsbawm and Rudé, p.258.

to accomplish that fire, you had a guilty privity of its being intended to take place.[34]

The relationship between the threat of arson and the demands of the 'rioting' crowds in the countryside, breaking machines and enforcing wage rates, is clearly of the greatest significance. It is important for an analysis of the 'movement' of Swing that we recall that arson – an act of lone terrorism – was still one of the main components in the *crowd's* armoury. Even in cases where the direct motive could be traced to an individual grievance, within the context of the events of August to December 1830 its impact was undoubtedly far wider. I would suggest that Swing the rick-burner was the crowd's black-faced enforcer, and his light of his fires carried far beyond the isolated homestead of the victim or the parish boundaries of the perpetrator's home community.

Much of the strength of the rioters' claims clearly derived from their ability to compel farmers and those in authority to submit to their demands, and in this they were fully aware of the alarm caused by fire. The material or economic impact of widespread arson was enormous[35]: the psychological impact, though harder to gauge, was even more impressive. The *Hampshire Chronicle* reported in November 1830 that "the whole of East Kent [is] thrown into a state of indescribable terror" by the fires, and Col. Jervoise's correspondent was clear that "the spirit of an incendiary is too hellish to treat with".[36] Perhaps we can begin to gauge the impact of arson on the public mind by the measures taken to prevent it. During the peculiar conditions of Swing, a proclamation was issued by the King offering considerable rewards for information leading to the discovery and apprehension of the 'rioters' and arsonists, as well as "our most gracious pardon (except the actual perpetrator of any of the said fires), in case the person making such discovery shall be liable to be prosecuted for the same".[37] However, the differential in the amounts offered for information on the two types of offence speaks volumes. For the first category, that of 'riot' (including 'robbery', mass demands for wage increases and machine breaking) the reward was £50; around one and a half times the yearly wage of an agricultural labourer. For arson, the reward was *£500*. Of course, consideration must be made for the amount of damage an arsonist could cause, how easily the act could be perpetrated, and how difficult it was to secure a conviction. But even so such a figure

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[34] HRO 14M50/4, 'SENTENCES' Of the Prisoners Tried before the Special Commission at Winchester, 1830', handbill (n.d.).

[35] Hobsbawm and Rudé gave a conservative figure during the period of Swing of "rather more than £100,000", although it's almost certain that they underestimated hugely. Carl Griffin's research on East Kent, for example, suggests that "Hobsbawm and Rudé have understated the actual number of Swing incidents by 85%". See Griffin, pp.139-40.

[36] *Hampshire Chronicle*, 1st November 1830; HRO 44M69/96/2/1/38 J Fitzgerald to G P Jervoise, 27th November 1830.

represented something like 10 years' wages for an ordinary labourer, a quite astonishing incentive to turn state's evidence. The Home Office correspondent cited above[38] clearly felt that the failure of the authorities to effectively curb the spread of arson was one of methods. He suggested that proclamations advertising the reward

> entirely lose their effect from the very imperfect method which is adopted to make them public...[W]hat use is it to publish a long proclamation in the county papers which no poor man is found to read or to post it upon walls as is normally done in small print and at such a height from the ground as to require a telescope to make it out?

"Let the Govt. only take the same steps to make public the amount of rewards which they so liberally offer," he concluded, "as quack doctors do to vend their medicines, and I will stake my existence that the present system would very quickly be put an end to".[39] This time, though, it seems that the loyal servant's reasoning had let him down: surely no-one, either by direct contact or by rumour, could fail to be aware of such a huge reward for their information. The authorities' failure in apprehending the arsonists in any significant number was, more likely, a testament to the solidarity of those involved in the Swing riots than to the failure of the methods of detection. As we have seen, of the 258 prisoners who stood trial at the Winchester Special Assizes not one was charged with arson. However, it is also testimony to the impact of arson on the public mind (and on that of the authorities) that of the 19 executions nationwide which resulted from the disturbances, 16 of them were for incendiarism.[40]

But if arson was the most potent weapon in Captain Swing's armoury, its power lay not only in its destructive potential. Despite the huge number of fires throughout the disturbances[41] not one life was lost to arson. Many of the farmers would have been at least partially insured against losses by fire, although this was becoming increasingly difficult as the disturbances multiplied.[42] The real power of the arsonist was, of course, symbolic. The fire in the rick-yard mirrored the fires of hell: the Lucifer match was new on the scene but its presence merely served to confirm this. It is no coincidence that Col. Jervoise's correspondent above described the spirit of the incendiary as "hellish", nor that

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[37] HRO 10M57/03/37, 'By The King. A Proclamation', handbill dated 23rd November 1830.
[38] See above, pp.16-17.
[39] PRO HO44/22/376-7, 'A Well Wisher to my Country' to the Home Office, 30th November 1830.
[40] Hobsbawm and Rudé, p.263.
[41] Hobsbawm and Rudé suggest that there were 316 incidents of arson out of a total of around 1,500 incidents overall, although both of these figures may well require serious upward revision, not least because the fires continued (and in some areas increased in number) for the next twelve months. See, for example, R Wells' chapter in A Randall and A Charlesworth (eds.), *Moral Economy and Popular Protest: Crowds, Conflict and Authority* (London, 1999) and, specifically for Kent, C Griffin, *Op. Cit.*.
[42] Among the most interesting accounts of refusals to insure during the disturbances, the Directors of the Western District Fire Office resolved at the beginning of December 1830 that no new insurance would be extended to farmers who persisted in using threshing machines. *Political Register*,

the correspondent of the Ipswich Journal, describing a fire at North Cove near Beccles, should state that "There is not a shadow of doubt of its being caused by the *diabolical* act of some incendiary" (my emphasis).[43] Within this context, it isn't so surprising that the strangers reported as instigators or incinerators were described as 'gentlemanly', 'well-dressed' and generally well-to-do: as J M Obelkevich points out in his study of popular religion in the nineteenth century, "[i]n most of the stories told of him, the Devil had the appearance of a gentleman dressed in black".[44] The labourers were fully aware of the symbolic power of arson. They knew how to use it to best effect and – mirroring the authorities' use of capital punishment – they were highly selective. Targets were carefully selected for maximum symbolic as well as material effect. Sometimes they were parish officers (as in the case of the overseers of Battle, Biggleswade and Briston); occasionally they were members of the magistracy, or even parliamentarians (as in Sussex at the premises of C S Pelham, member for Shropshire); most often, a farmer or landowner was targeted for a very specific reason, usually involving the underpayment or oppressive treatment of his labourers.[45] On the few occasions where attacks were made on what were perceived to be 'undeserving' targets, reports in the press tells their own story. When a small farmer at Bearsted in Kent had his grain store burnt, the *Morning Chronicle* reported that "[t]his man was remarkable for his kindness to the poor; and the villagers are at a loss to imagine what cause of offence he had given to the diabolical miscreants who have reduced him to beggary". Another unfortunate target near Cumner, Berkshire, was "one of those small farmers occupying scarcely more land than he himself could manage," and as a result "I don't know where the excitement could be to destroy his property". In a similar vein, when a farm under the occupation of Mr. Quaife was under threat on 27th November, much of it was saved "by the inhabitants and labourers of Battle and its neighbourhood, to whom great praise is due" – and this despite the fact that Battle and the surrounding area was the focus for some of the most militant crowd actions in the south of England. Notably, the *Hastings Iris* does not specify arson as the cause (merely stating that "a fire broke out on the premises") but it does go to great lengths to tell the reader that "Mr. Quaife never had or used a thrashing machine, and always paid his labourers very liberally".[46]

4th December 1830, pp.917-8.

[43] Quoted in *Political Register*, 20th November 1830, pp.790-1.

[44] J K Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsay 1825-1875*, p.277.

[45] *Kent Herald* quoted in the *Morning Chronicle*, 6th November 1830; *Norwich Mercury* quoted in the *Political Register*, 20th November 1830, p.792; *Political Register*, 4th December 1830, pp.912, 906.

[46] *Morning Chronicle*, 13th November 1830; *Political Register*, 11th December 1830, p.976; quoted in

Arson, then, was a potent weapon not only for the damage it could do to property, but also for its symbolic value. A blaze in the countryside could be seen for many miles, marking out the target like a scarlet letter. Even the press, in highlighting those who clearly were not deserving targets, seemed tacitly to acknowledge that the arsonist chose his victim with a degree of consideration. And as we have seen, labourers came in large numbers to the scene of a fire, and not always to assist in putting it out. A blazing rick could be as much a focus for discontent as a crowd marching to the victim's front door to demand an increase in wages or the destruction of a threshing machine. Under the special conditions of Swing, a blazing rick was not just retribution, nor was it merely a threat – it was also a potent call to arms. This is certainly the case in the following extract of a song taken from Charles Kingsley's *Yeast*. In a clear echo of Hobsbawm and Rudé's assessment of the protesters a century later, Kingsley's labourers are not merely suffering from distress but are "degraded", "stupified and spiritless", and "rather sunk too low in body and mind" to follow the path taken by the Leicestershire machine breakers towards organised protest. And yet the song he has them sing at the village revel clearly belies this bleak and uncomprehending view of rural popular consciousness and its concomitant, rural protest. It is a powerful and sophisticated piece of polemic and, in the context of 1830, a clarion call to action:

> I seed a fire on Monday night,
> A fire both great and high;
> But I will not tell you where, my boys,
> Nor will I tell you why.
> -----
> A blind old dame come to the fire,
> So near as she could get;
> Says she, 'Here's luck I warn't asleep
> To lose this blessed hett'.
>
> They robs us of our turfing rights,
> Our bits of chips and sticks,
> Till poor folks now can't warm their hands,
> Except by farmer's ricks.
>
> CHORUS
> Then here's a curse on farmers all
> As rob and grind the poor;
> To reap the fruit of all their works
> In Hell for ever more.[47]

Political Register, 4th December 1830, p.906.

[47] C Kingsley, *Yeast: A Problem* (London 1851), pp.175, 177, 180. This is my own interpretation of the

iii) Protest and Customary Consciousness

If the voice of the arsonist remains largely hidden from history, then the voice of the crowd is clearly more easily heard. That said, the usual means of accessing that voice – through court testimony and depositions, or through accounts taken down by later commentators and newspapers – is itself highly problematic. In the first place, there is the question of mediation. In the second, we must consider the stark realities of court procedure from the viewpoint of the defendant. Testimony about an event given in court by the participants themselves may not necessarily reflect the reality of that event. A crowd action (or 'riot') is essentially an expression of defiance: unlike arson and anonymous threatening letters, which by definition acknowledge the power and authority of the forces ranged against them, a 'riot' is a direct challenge to that power and authority. But as James Scott says of 'everyday forms of peasant resistance':

> Gramsci is, I believe, misled when he claims that the radicalism of the subordinate classes is to be found more in their acts than in their beliefs. It is more nearly the reverse. The realm of behaviour – particularly in power-laded situations – is precisely where dominated classes are constrained. And it is at the level of beliefs and interpretations – where they can be safely ventured – that subordinate classes are least trammelled.[48]

For the agricultural Labourers of the south of England widespread riot and open acts of defiance in 1830 were in themselves acts of extreme courage, acts which would – indeed, *could* – have been taken only *in extremis*. As a result, by the time he had been apprehended, jailed and subjected to the due process of law, it is unthinkable that a labourer facing prosecution for a transportable offence – let alone one punishable by death – would exhibit in court (or to court officials, or to any other figure of authority) the self-confidence and defiance of the crowd. Surely it is far more likely that he would downplay the actions of the crowd and of himself within it, trivialise the demands made, and minimise the overall social meaning that the crowd's actions may have held for the wider community.

"Honourable Baron Night [*sic*]," wrote William Winkworth to Sir Thomas Baring:

> I have taken the liberty of addressing these few lines to you wich I hope and trust will not be an offence unto you to Say that I am hartley sorrey for what I have done in being so ignorantly forced with the mob in November Last but I hope And trust you have forgave me as I never tuch one thing to distroy it and was hartley sorrey to see the Destruction which was made on your property.[49]

Whatever the truth of Winkworth's involvement, he was not alone in denying or

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unfathomable 'west of England' dialect that Kingsley uses in the book.

48 James C Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (Yale 1985), p.322.

downplaying his role in the 'riots' or claiming that he was pressed by the crowd to participate. Undoubtedly, many of those who took part in crowd actions *were* reluctant participants. This was the plea of the Mason brothers of Bullington, and Enos Diddams, the Radical shoemaker of Sutton Scotney from whom we heard earlier, said in their defence:

> I have known the two Masons for ten years. They are peculiarly honest, sober, and industrious men...They are both civil and peaceable men. I saw a man pressed by this mob at nine or ten o'clock on the 19th of November opposite my own wicket.

Even known men of action claimed mitigation for their involvement to outsiders: Joseph Carter acted as 'treasurer' for the Micheldever crowd, holding levied 'donations' and later doling them out in equal measure; as late as 1845, he continued to claim that it was the young, single labourers who had led the protests and who had forced others (including himself) to join them. "It was the young men as did it," he said, "they worked, you see, for little wages, as they do now. They suffers most".[50] In fact, according to Hobsbawm and Rudé the majority of those prosecuted for crowd actions during the Swing disturbances were of marriageable age and above, and those sent to Australia were on average significantly older than those transported for other crimes.[51] Bearing in mind E P Thompson's assertion that anonymity is an essential component of social protest wherever the leaders of open protest are easily identified and apprehended, it is hardly surprising that many labourers in the vicinity of open acts of defiance should show a reluctance to become involved. Given that its demands relied to a large extent on the threat of numbers, it is equally predictable that the crowd should demand their participation. But the simple swelling of numbers was not the only rationale behind the mob 'pressing' labourers and others to join its ranks. As the crowd who took away Lady Cavan's labourers at Eaglehurst made clear, it was essential for the success of its wider demands that all those in the locality who had an interest should be represented. "I turned to my own labourers," she said in evidence to the Winchester Commission,

> and said, I hoped not one of them would join the mob. The mob said they should come; if not by fair means, they should by foul: it should be the act of one and all...They said, They Would do no harm that day; their object was to collect all the parish, and to compel the magistrates to grant what they wanted.

Even in its pressing, the Swing crowd could be highly disciplined and discriminating. Mr Hodd of Ringmer, for example,

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[49] HRO 92M95/F2/8/8, William Winkworth to Sir Thomas Baring (n.d.)

[50] HRO Book 328, shelf 184, *A Report of the Proceedings at the Special Commission Holden at Winchester, December 20, 1830, and 8 Following Days*, p.39; A Somerville, *The Whistler at the Plough* (Manchester 1852), p.272.

[51] Hobsbawm and Rudé, p.247.

> was visited by about sixty workmen, who found him working his thrashing machine. They told him they were come for his men. Mr. H. asked that one might be left, which was granted...Thence they proceeded to Wellingham, to Mr. John Rickman's, where the men also said they were perfectly satisfied with their master and his wages; but the whole of the men, except the bailiff, were obliged to go.[52]

At Sturry and Westbene, Norfolk, the crowd pressed all the labourers in the locality, but it was careful to take *only those who earned less than half-a-crown a day.*[53] Solidarity between the labourers was clearly of the first importance. Despite the lack of evidence of large-scale organization, and certainly despite the absence of widespread combination in the countryside, those involved in Swing were only too aware of the dangers of discord in an undertaking of this kind. But where did this solidarity originate? Not in orthodox combination – not in the countryside in 1830; nor even simply in the workplace or the locality (it was reported that the crowd above reached three to four hundred by the end of the day, and others – allowing for a degree of hyperbole – were said to have been as large as 1,000 men strong; far too many labourers to have been familiar with each other simply from work or even from village life). Rather, I would suggest that this solidarity was to an extent 'organic'; that it originated in the fact of everyday life in the countryside. So it was that at times the crowd even attempted to enlist the support of the structurally superior.

We have already seen how the Micheldever crowd attempted to persuade the Rev. Cockerton to speak to the farmers on its behalf, but at other times the crowd was not so polite in its request for assistance. The crowd at Mayfield, Sussex, "pressed all they came near into their ranks. Remonstrance and entreaty were in vain; farmers, tradespeople and labourers, all were obliged to congregate and accompany the multitude".[54] In this instance, their aim was to compel the Rev. Mr. Kirby to reduce his tithes from a princely £1,200 or £1,400 to a more modest £400, the remainder to be remitted to the farmers. Here again, the crowd demonstrated a keen understanding that all those who had an interest in the proceedings should be present to add weight and substance to its demands, hence the pressing of farmers (who, in paying a reduced tithe, would be able to comply with the crowd's demand for an increase in wages), and tradespeople (who as a consequence would see their trade increase). Sometimes, the crowd seems at first sight to have been quite perverse in its choice of participants.

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[52] One interesting aside here is that Mr. Hodd's thrashing machine apparently remained unmolested; this was clearly a discriminating crowd, alive to the nuances of each individual farmer's working practices and production relations.

[53] HRO Book 328, Shelf 184, *A Report of the Proceedings...*, pp.81-2; *Political Register*, 20th November 1830, pp.786, 791.

[54] *Political Register*, 20th November 1830, p.784.

Having raided a blacksmith's shop for tools to perform the work of destroying threshing machines, the crowd at Pamber then tried to persuade the blacksmith himself – who also happened to be parish overseer – to join them in their work. He refused, and the crowd demanded a contribution of money from him (two shillings and sixpence). Even more unlikely, a member of the crowd which threatened Harris Bigg Wither junr. and his father, and which allegedly solicited a sovereign from the old man with menaces, later tried to enlist Bigg Wither junr. to its cause. "After the mob had left my Fathers premises," he deposed, "I followed them and it was about an Hour afterwards that by the same mob I was pelted a stick and a stone were thrown at me – one of the men asked me for half a sovereign and another begged me to join them".[55] Now, Harris Jervoise Bigg Wither might appear to be an unlikely spokesman for the labourers, but was this request for his participation merely the indiscriminate solicitation of an 'improvised' and 'spontaneous' crowd? It could be simply that 'the higher the station, the louder the voice'; that Bigg Wither – like the Pamber overseer, the Reverend Cockerton and others who spoke for the labourers – were pressed to give their support because of the weight they carried locally. But given the mass of evidence elsewhere of the discipline and discrimination of Swing crowds, this alone seems unlikely. We've already seen how the crowd at Wellingham took all the men from Mr. Rickman's farm *except the bailiff*, and how a Norfolk crowd wished only to have the services of labourers who earned less than half-a-crown a day. In fact, I would suggest that Bigg Wither was entreated to join the crowd for another reason: to reinforce the vertical ties of rural society. Had he accepted the offer, he would thereby have articulated by his very presence a fundamental tenet of the Swing crowd's action and methodology; that the mutual ties between labourer, farmer and even landowner were stronger than the ties of money or class. This is an area which will be dealt with at greater length in Chapters 2 and 3, but it is important at this point to note that the crowd was not only self-conscious of its status *as a crowd*, but that it was fully aware of its symbolic importance in terms of the wider social context of the countryside. It chose its members carefully, and those it included (or attempted to include) were so chosen not merely for the material support they could offer but also for the message that their inclusion articulated. Hence the request sent to Mr Egerton of Roche House in Hampshire, "desiring my attendance at one attack [on a threshing

[55] HRO 10M57/03/33, Deposition of Harris Bigg Jervoise Bigg Wither to Revd. John Orde, 24th November 1830.

machine] in a field near the Church".[56] The point of the attack was not merely the destruction of the machine; this would have been achieved just as efficiently with or without the presence of the eminent gentleman. The point was that it should have been witnessed – overseen, even – by all sections of village society, from the highest to the lowest, bringing them together as participants and thus conferring a far greater symbolic significance to the act.

Returning briefly to the issue of labourers who were 'pressed' by the crowd, even when a man was reluctant to join, his fear of capture and punishment may yet have been overtaken by his wish to see wrongs righted. Indeed, some such participants in the 'riots' seem to have finished by being the crowd's most zealous protagonists. As we have seen, Joseph Carter long maintained that he was forced to go along with the Micheldever 'mob', yet in the event he became the crowd's 'treasurer', receiving money from 'donors' and doleing it out at the end of the day. James Hunt and George Taylor, labourers from Steventon near Basingstoke, both deposed that they had been forced to accompany a crowd that perambulated the homes of the local well-to-do, demanding money and refreshments and breaking threshing machines. And yet both independently attested that they happily took their share of the spoils at the end of the day. Taylor was apparently free to leave before the end of the day's work, and only after some time did he claim his share: "I left them about 3 o'clock," he told a local magistrate, "and shared some of the money afterward".[57] It has already been suggested that the depositions of those who gave evidence that they were pressed might have been given for the very reasonable motive of self-preservation. Even the notorious 'Captain Hunt' – whose real name was Thomas Cooper, and who was the clear and forceful leader of a crowd that demolished two factories at Fordingbridge – told the Special Commission that he had been an unwilling participant, forced to follow the crowd by threats and intimidation.[58] However, as we shall see, the overall pattern of crowd action suggests a high degree of co-operation and purpose, and a discipline which could only have been achieved with the unity and complicity of the majority of its members. To return to the original point, it is clear that to absorb the 'official' testimony of the participants uncritically risks seriously misrepresenting the motivations and mentality, the *reality* of Swing. The question, then, is how else are we to get close to that reality? I have already tentatively suggested that

[56] HRO 44M69/G6/2/1/38, F J Egerton to G P Jervoise, 30th November 1830.
[57] HRO 10M57/03/08, Depositions of James Hunt and George Taylor to the Revd. John Orde, 2nd December 1830.
[58] See below, p.37.

we might begin to do so by looking more closely at the ways in which the crowd actually behaved during the disturbances. In so doing, we should keep as our frame of reference what we know (or are told) from elsewhere of the customary backdrop of the lives of agricultural labourers in early nineteenth-century England: in a sense, I am suggesting nothing more or less than reading the 'body language' of Swing. Social behaviour is, of course, socially conditioned. As Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth have noted, "riots might be atypical of [social] events, but they unmasked many of the values of a common people which in other times went unvoiced. Riots revealed their underlying assumptions about social and economic relations".[59] Conversely, if we can find any other fruitful indications of those "unvoiced" values and assumptions, they in turn may help us to 'unmask' Swing. This interplay between 'riot' (or crowd action) as a response to crisis or distress and its social meaning within the context of a coherent customary consciousness has, I would suggest, been neglected within the historiography of the 1830 disturbances.

As we have seen, central to the 'mobbings' around Micheldever in November 1830 was the exaction of 'levies' or contributions by the crowd from the structurally superior. The exaction of such contributions was common to many of the 'riots' across the whole landscape of Swing. We have seen the way that money, from two shillings and sixpence to ten pounds, was coerced from figures of authority in Hampshire, but this was fairly minor compared to the contributions levied by the Kintbury crowd, who are reported to have amassed more than £100 by the end of their work.[60] Overall, Hobsbawm and Rudé counted 219 such incidents of 'robbery' (as it was interpreted by the authorities) although once again this figure may require serious upward revision as more local research is undertaken.[61] Most of these occurred in Hampshire, Berkshire and Wiltshire, but they were recorded as far north as Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire, and as far east as Kent. Bob Bushaway has suggested that the exaction of 'levies' or 'donations' by Swing crowds mirrors the well-established and widespread custom of 'crying largess' or exacting 'civility money'. Such customs were particularly widespread at harvest-time, and on other special occasions in the rural calendar, and it's notable that many such occasions occurred on saints days in November and December – the very period when Swing was at its height. However, "the elaborate ritual of crying largess

[59] A Charlesworth and A Randall, 'The Moral Economy: Riot, Markets and Social Conflict' in A Charlesworth and A Randall (eds.), p.4.
[60] Hobsbawm and Rudé, p.138.
[61] See Griffin, pp.139-40.

was not always present, and in some places a simple request for money from passers-by sufficed. Elsewhere, largess was collected by labourers perambulating the houses of the neighbourhood soliciting money from door to door".[62] While it would be foolish to suggest that the structurally superior who provided 'largess' were entirely happy to be part of such rituals and customs, it cannot be over-emphasised just how important this customary backdrop, this sense of legitimising precedent, was for the participants of the Swing crowds. They clearly felt their actions to be justified within the framework of normative customary activity. This is not to suggest that they felt themselves to be engaged in some anodyne rural ritual without social meaning. The enforced exaction of 'contributions' by labourers from farmers, the clergy and others local notables was, in whatever context, clearly an expression of collective power, a reminder that the crowd still held a reasonable hand when it acted in concert against the forces that normally held sway in the village. But this element of ritual, this customary precedent, seems to me in the context of Swing to require a very different interpretation to that usually applied to 'riot'.

Robert Mason for one was clearly shocked to be accused of 'robbery'. "At the late Assizes you were my prosecutor, and the charge was "robbing" you of 5/-," he wrote to the Reverend Joliffe:

> Had a number of 40, 50, or 100 come to me, yes, to such a person as <u>me</u>, and had actually demanded 5/-, why, I should have given it to them, and reluctantly enough, but after they had gone, of it I should have thought no more, however not more than this "ah they have got it and much good may it do them". But to impute it to "robbery" it would have been the least of my thoughts.[63]

This was not 'robbery' for Robert Mason, just as it was not for the crowd in general. He clearly understood the complexity of the relationship between donor and recipient: he was at pains to emphasise that he recognised the money was given "reluctantly enough". But the crowd of which he was a part were not bandits, they were merely exercising what they saw as long-standing and legitimate rights within the locality: the right of the majority of the community to set the social agenda, the right of the poor to be materially supported by the rich, and the right of one side in the social and production process to compel the other side to behave as 'custom' demanded. That this was the case is borne out by the manner in which such exactions were made. Mostly, the crowd behaved well, and except for the intimidation of numbers made no threat on the person of the expected

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[62] Bob Bushaway, *By Rite* (London 1982), p.131.
[63] HRO 92M95/F2/8/4, Robert Mason to the Revd. J Joliffe, 27th January 1831.

donor; as E P Thompson has pointed out, they were largely "unbloodthirsty".[64] "There was not the least injury done or threatened to your person or property," continued Robert Mason to the Revd. Joliffe, "not a saucy or disrespectful word was uttered as I heard, you was thanked for your donation".[65] Cobbett referred to such instances of coercion as "sturdy begging", and clearly departed from the forces of law and order when he described how "the Bishop [of Winchester] in coming from Winchester to his palace at *Farnham*, was met by a band of sturdy beggars, whom some call robbers". The Bishop was asked for money, which he felt compelled to give, but to Cobbett's approbation,

> he did not *prosecute* them; he had not a man of them called to account for his conduct; but, the next day, set *twenty-four labourers to constant work*; opened up his castle to the distressed of all ages, and supplied all with food and other necessaries who stood in need of them. This was becoming a Christian teacher.[66]

Cobbett, not known for his outbursts of affection towards the high clergy, was clearly impressed by the Bishop's sense of social responsibility. In the Bishop's response to his 'robbery', and in Cobbett's description of it in the *Register*, we can perhaps divine something of the attitude of the labourers themselves.

Crucial to Cobbett's (and, by demonstration, the Bishop of Winchester's) interpretation of crowd's action is that robbery is a crime against statute law and against the person, whereas the exaction of customary levies and donations may (unfairly) be interpreted as a crime against the law, but it is *not so against the person*. Cobbett clearly understood that these were special times, and he also understood that there was something at stake for the labourers which was at least as important as an increase in wages or the elimination of machine competition in the thrashing of the harvest. In their self-conscious crowd actions, the labourers were articulating an alternative social agenda from that which increasingly confronted them, and crucial to this social agenda was the interpretation of what was 'lawful' (by their own definition) and what was not. In their 'sturdy begging', the labourers were clearly asserting the rights of custom – *their* law – over statute law, and occasionally this was made explicit. "My husband said Don't you know you are taking the Law into your hands," deposed Sarah Hooper of Monk Sherborne: "Richard Keens said, We have got the Laws in our own hands and all hollowed Hurrah." Similarly, the crowd that 'robbed' Harris Bigg Wither senr. stated "the Law is in our hands we have had plenty of Law," and their actions spoke volumes of how this popular law should operate. There is no doubt that this particular 'band of

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64 See above, p.1.
65 HRO 92M95/F2/8/4, Mason to Joliffe, 27th January 1831.
66 *Political Register*, 22nd January 1831, pp.158-9.

sturdy beggars' were sturdier than most. According to Bigg Wither, they threatened to attack his house if he refused to give them what they required (a sovereign), even going so far as to raise their hammers over their heads. Even so, and despite such threatening behaviour, when he refused to give them the money, merely holding open his waistcoat pocket, none of the crowd would take it. In the end, the money had to be given 'freely' by Bigg Wither's coachman, who reached into his pocket "under the apprehension that injury would be done to [Bigg Wither's] property". As if to emphasise that their actions were in no way to be construed as common robbery, when he offered them his pocket watch they replied (in his words): "No – we do not take your watch put it back in your pocket". Similarly, the protocol of the same crowd was evident, and was strictly observed, when it exacted two sovereigns from William Lutley Sclater of Tangier Park.

> I said there are two sovereigns in my pocket – you must take them out if you insist on it. They said, no, we will not do that you shall give them to us...I then took the two sovereigns from my pocket and held them in my hands – In the course of a few minutes while talking with them I was rather hustled and the money fell from my hand on the ground – several stooped down – picked the money up and cried He has dropped it – He has dropped it. They then appeared to be satisfied and went away after giving a cheer in the direction of Malshangar.[67]

Clearly, the crowd felt that there were serious implications in having taken the money 'by force' (without it having been actively handed over to them by the patron). But even so, it is unlikely that the labourers could possibly have believed that their threatening behaviour and menacing words did not in themselves constitute a serious breach of statute law. It is far more likely that they were well aware that what they were doing contravened the laws of the state, but that despite this it was necessary to remain within their own customary boundaries of what was acceptable and what was not in order to reinforce the very message of 'sturdy begging'; that of mutual responsibilities which were enacted and reinforced by a rigid adherence to customary protocol. Robert Mason, for one, was clear that although he "had been found 'guilty' of a daring 'robbery'...I am quite certain that you, nor anyone who knows me, will think the worse of me for that".[68]

Another part of the customary protocol of 'sturdy begging' was that it should be transparently fair. Often, the money collected was either received by or lodged with a 'treasurer', a trusted member of the crowd (such as Joseph Carter at Micheldever), who then divided it equally at the end of the day's 'work'. And despite their eagerness to resort to statute law after the event, the victims of such crowds were just as aware of this protocol, and even insisted on it being observed before giving 'levies' or 'donations'.

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[67] HRO 10M57/03/33, Depositions of Harris Bigg Wither Senr., Sarah Hooper and William Lutley Sclater to the Revd. John Orde and others, 24th November 1830.

Thus, Joseph Lane, upon meeting a crowd of labourers in Quarley, "asked what they were in the habit of receiving...[and] asked who was the moneytaker". He was told that a sovereign was the usual 'donation', and that the moneytaker was a man called Rose, and only then did he comply with the crowd's request: "As soon as they saw it they gave three cheers, and went away. Gregory [the alleged leader] called 'silence' to the mob after that, and they were silent. He told them not to set fire to any house, but to prevent fire, if they could".[69]

Such monetary 'donations' exacted by Swing crowds were by no means the only contributions demanded or given. We have already noted that having agreed to the crowd's demand for an increase of wages to 2 shillings a day, and having been already divested of £1, William Paine of Borough Farm then sealed the agreement with beer, which he provided for the men.[70] This pattern of demanding (and receiving) refreshment was repeated again and again. At Henfield in Sussex:

> A large meeting of the farming labourers took place...for the purpose of obtaining an increase in wages. They were met by the gentlemen of the parish. After terms had been stated, upon which they were in future to be employed, and which were highly satisfactory to the assembled poor...refreshments were given them in a field opposite the George Inn, and they afterwards paraded the town, headed by a band of music, and dispersed without the occurrence of the least unpleasant circumstance.[71]

The provision of refreshments is, in one sense, merely an extension of the exaction of money payments. It is the symbolic reaffirmation of the right which the poor held over the rich, through custom, to be adequately provided for. In another sense, though, it is crucial for an understanding of the mentality which underpinned Swing. For refreshment – and particularly beer – made crowd action less of a riot, and more of a feast. We have seen how the Henfield crowd was given refreshments, and then "paraded the town, headed by a band of music". Undoubtedly this was, in part, an expression of triumph at having succeeded in their demands. But it should also be viewed within the customary framework of feasts and festivals. Feasting held a central role in rural life in the early nineteenth century, in cementing and reinforcing social ties between the classes, and between masters and men. We don't need to go into great detail here about the central importance of the harvest supper or of the feasts of the saints in the social calendar to emphasise the importance of such events for social cohesion; it will suffice to mark John Clare's words (written around 1820) with regard to the harvest home, when

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[68] HRO 92M95/F2/8/7, Robert Mason to James Ray, 7th February 1831.
[69] HRO Book 328, Shelf 184, *A Report of the Proceedings,* pp.43-4.
[70] See above, p.5.
[71] *The Sussex Advertiser*, 29th November 1830, quoted in Bushaway, p.192.

> ...masters [levelled] with their men,
> Who push'd the beer about, and smok'd and drank.[72]

But there can be no doubt that custom and precedent marked out certain occasions as auspicious for the labouring poor in the process of negotiating social roles and responsibilities within the community. In a Bakhtinian sense:

> The feast (every feast) is an important primary form of human culture. It cannot be explained merely by the practical conditions of the community's work, and it would be even more superficial to attribute it to the psychological demand for periodic rest. The feast had always an essential, meaningful philosophic content.[73]

Part of that "philosophic content" was the bonding of those who took part, the creation of *common cause*. To sit, to eat and drink, and to sing beside one another – whether common labourer or large farmer – was to recognise and accept just those social ties noted above, the bonds of the countryside and of community. It was to accept the common interest of all those involved in the process of agriculture, and it was to accept the mutual responsibility of labour and capital within the context of work as within life. It was, in a sense, to accept the vertical divisions of rural society and to reject the horizontal divisions of class.

Within the context of Swing, the ability of the crowd to demand – and receive – refreshment and monetary doles indicates, of course, that *this* table had quite literally been turned; that this was a feast wherein they sat at its head. "We have just heard," reported a Sussex paper in November 1830,

> that a letter has been sent to the *Earl of Liverpool* by the peasantry, stating that they *intended dining with him in the course of the week.* His Lordship hearing of their assembling *at Mayfield*, rode thither, and took that opportunity of telling them that he did *not desire to be so far honoured*; but if, instead of calling on him, they would content themselves with *entertainment at Buxted public-house*, they should have plenty to eat and drink.[74]

In this instance, the crowd's success was only partial: they were unable to persuade the Earl of Liverpool to make common cause with them at table, but nonetheless they were able to compel him to lay on a feast on their behalf. In this, the 'moveable feast' of Swing echoed other calendrical occasions on which the social order could be temporarily inverted, where the high could be brought low and the low raised high. This inversion, this 'liminality', according to Victor Turner, reminds all within the community that "the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low". Turner goes on to suggest that this kind of 'liminality' is "frequently found in cyclical and calendrical ritual, usually of a collective kind, in which, at certain

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[72] From John Clare's 'The Village Minstrel', quoted in Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge 1992), p.58.
[73] M Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (New York 1965) p.198.

points in the seasonal cycle, groups or categories of persons who habitually occupy low status positions in the social structure are positively enjoined to exercise ritual authority over their superiors". Such rituals, he suggests, can reorder the prevailing social structure as a "communitas", which he defines as "society as an undifferentiated, homogenous whole, in which individuals confront each other integrally, and not as 'segmentalised' into status and roles". In this, he echoes Bakhtin's definition of 'carnival' as a time when "all were considered equal":

> Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, profession, property and age...All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with [the] pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities.[75]

On occasion, the use of 'carnival' during the Swing disturbances to emphasise the "gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" was strikingly direct. At Brede in East Sussex, for example, Thomas Abel, Assistant Overseer of the poor and Governor of the Poor House, was ceremonially ejected from the parish in a cart. The symbolism of the cart was in itself vital for an understanding of the events, for it was the cart normally used by the local unemployed in their parish work of drawing stones and gravel for road-mending under direction of the Overseer. Elsewhere, we are told that 'idlers' and 'idiots' were tied to the cart on the orders of the parish either as a punishment or to keep them under control. Significantly (and this is a point to which we will return at greater length), according to one source the issue at stake for the Brede crowd was not wholly, nor even primarily economic. Despite the fact that they subsequently proposed an amended wage scale (which was adopted), the informant stated to Ashurst Majendie, respondent to the Poor Law Commissioners, that "he is quite sure, that if they had not met for the purpose of turning out the overseer, they never would have met as they did for a rise of wages. They had not idea of it; for several said they would *not mind being poor, if they could but be used with civility*" (my emphasis).[76] Clearly, Abel had contravened the customary boundaries of what was and was not 'reasonable' behaviour in his treatment of recipients of parish relief, and he was to be given a lesson by the poor themselves. They stated their determination in writing "to take Mr. Abell, the present assistant-overseer, out of the parish to any adjoining parish he may appoint", but despite (or rather, because of) his treatment of *them*, the labourers of Brede vowed that in so doing they would nevertheless

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[74] *The Sussex Advertiser* quoted in the *Political Register*, 20th November 1830, p.785.
[75] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: structure and anti-structure* (2nd. ed., New York 1977), pp.97, 167; M Bakhtin, pp.199-200.
[76] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix A(1), 'Reports of Commissioners', p.201.

"use him with civility".[77] Abel (or Abell, depending on the report) was accompanied during his ejection by a large crowd, including many women and children, who wore ribbands in their hats and formed a procession behind the cart. The men of the parish marched on either side in mock military formation with staves slung over their shoulders:

> The villagers brought the cart to Abel's door, seized him and placed him in it with a rope tied round his neck, to which a large stone was tied. Without scarcely an exception, the whole of the inhabitants accompanied the labourers, who thus drew him out of the parish attended by 'rough music'. They at first fixed on the parish of Westfield to deposit their load; but his fame having extended to that hamlet, he was rejected by the people, and the procession bent their steps to Vinehall, near Robertsbridge, where it appears, rubbish-like, he was 'shot out' of the cart into the road and there left with this blessing, - that if he ever made his appearance again at Brede he would get his head broke.[78]

Others in a position of authority who had offended the crowd were similarly ejected ceremonially and with the accompaniment of music, such as Mr. Read, agent for the management of the tithes belonging to Lord Carrington, who the crowd had "mount his horse, [and] led him with drum and fife through the village to the turnpike-gate, and told him to leave the parish by the gate at which he had first entered it".[79]

I would suggest that it is only within this vision of 'carnival', the inversion and 'liminality' of calendar customs, that the rituals of Swing can be fully understood. As we have seen, the authorities were shocked that the agricultural labourers could be so forceful in their demands, so brazen in their methods. But if Hampshire Quarter Sessions' Chairman, Richard Pollen, was particularly alarmed at the labourers' "method of combining", which he had thought was confined to the "Manufacturing Classes", then this is perhaps more an indication of his own withdrawal from the 'communitas' of rural village life than the reality of the methods of Swing.[80] For there is a clear sense in which the crowds operated, not so much in 'new' combinations, or with a 'modern' political consciousness, but firmly within the protocols of rural customary culture. On other doleing days in the rural calendar labourers would parade the parish, just as they did at Henfield, soliciting food, drink or money from their more fortunate neighbours. The saints days of All Souls, St Clement, St Andrew, and St Thomas were all such occasions. Each had its own defining rituals, such as cakes being given in response to a rhyme chanted on All Saints Day, or St Clem's feast, which was the culmination of the procession on St Clement's Day. An old Hampshire man recalled the ritual of St

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[77] *Political Register*, 20th November 1830, p.789.
[78] *Political Register*, 13th November 1830, pp.724-5.
[79] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws,* Appendix A(1), 'Reports of Commissioners', p.178.
[80] Quoted in Kent, p.15.

Thomas' Day doleing in the 1820s:

> I remember when a boy, some seventy years since, being with my grandfather in the house of a respectable farmer on the morning of the 21st of December, and seeing in the kitchen a large tub standing, filled with wheat, and the recipients, coming trooping in, each carrying a bag to receive the customary 'gooding', which was afterwards taken to the nearest mill to be exchanged for an equal value of flour.[81]

Of course, these doleings – or 'goodings' – had a vital, and increasing, economic relevance for the village poor in the early nineteenth century. But at their heart was an affirmation and reinforcement of the customary relationship between rich and poor; the recognition of mutual dependence and responsibility. Crucially, there is no sense in which these doles and donations were received by their recipients passively, in the manner we might expect of eleemosynary charity. Central to many of the ritual doleing days was the parade or procession, just as it was in the ejection of Assistant Overseer Abel. On these days the labourers and their families processioned the parish, often accompanied by a band or by rough music, and (within the context of local custom) overturned the usual norms of the social order, 'demanding' contributions from the structurally superior. They did not, like Oliver Twist, wait patiently in line. In this sense, such contributions were not regarded as 'largess' or 'charity' in the narrow sense at all. Rather, they were the price the rich paid for *being* rich: they were a reminder to all of the natural order of the parish or village, that a farmer's wealth and status were bought at the high cost of the sweat and (to an extent) the limited wealth of his labourers. Once again, they were an affirmation of mutual economic, as well as social, responsibilities, and this was mirrored almost exactly in the protocol of the Swing crowds. "[Robert] Mason asked for meat and drink," testified the his prosecutor, the Reverend James Joliffe. "I said, 'You know I cannot give you much'. He said, 'You have more than we have, and you must give us something'. The others said, 'We must have 5s.'. I gave them 5s.".[82]

We have already seen how the crowds often appointed a familiar and trustworthy member from their midst to act as honorary 'treasurer'. Other officials appear to have been likewise 'elected' (or, at times, self-appointed) to act as leaders or spokesmen for the crowd. At Battle, the labourers "made a formal demand of 12s., selecting as their spokesman a man known as a particularly honest and industrious character".[83] It is hardly surprising that these men were figures of some authority within the community, but it is also notable that they often went under a pseudo-military or official sobriquet: Hobsbawm and Rudé note the leadership of 'Captain' Revell at Ash in Kent, 'General'

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[81] *Hampshire Observer*, 20th July 1890, quoted in Bushaway, p.188.
[82] HRO Book 328, Shelf 184, *A Report of the Proceedings..., op. cit.*, p.89.

Moore at Garlinge on the Isle of Thanet, 'Counsellor' Richard Knockolls at Swanton Abbott, Norfolk, and many others. One of the most infamous of these was the self-styled 'Captain Hunt', who, as we have already noted, led a crowd around Fordingbridge on the Hampshire-Dorset border on the 23rd and 24th November. 'Captain Hunt' (whose real name was James Thomas Cooper) cut a grand figure, riding a white horse and sporting a top hat. He presided over the breaking of threshing machines before leading the crowd to East Mill and Stuckton, where they broke all the machinery at Samuel Thompson's sacking manufactory and William Shepherd's threshing-machine factory.[84] Cooper's appropriation of the name 'Hunt' is in itself intriguing, given the place the redoubtable orator held in the affections of the authorities, but so too is his use of the title of 'Captain'. The 'Captains' on the ground were clearly the lieutenants of the overall Captain, the eponymous Swing. But in action, they also mirrored other figures of authority 'elected' or appointed by the same crowds in other contexts and at other times. During the harvest, for example, labourers elected a trusted 'harvest lord' to act as mediator between them and the farmer. His function mirrored closely the role of the spokesmen, the 'officials' of the Swing crowd. The harvest lord would negotiate wages on behalf of the labourers, he enforced discipline at work and decided upon punishments for those who transgressed customarily expected behaviour. Bob Bushaway has suggested that one model for the harvest lord was the medieval 'ripreeve' who

> was elected by the tenants of the lord of the manor as an assistant to the hayward or beadle in the operation of the harvest. He acted as an interface between the lord's officials and his tenants and helped ensure the quality of the work, that there was no pilfering or slackness. He was responsible to the lord of the manor through the hayward or beadle and to the tenants by his election.

Interestingly, Bushaway also notes that sheep shearers elected a similar figure at shearing time, and he was known as their 'Captain'.[85]

Another customary phenomenon we should note at this point is the presence of beer at the conclusion of 'negotiations' for wage increases or the destruction of threshing machines. We have already commented on the centrality of beer and refreshments to the 'carnival' of Swing – in effect, creating a 'moveable feast', with all that that customarily implied – and we've seen how the exaction of beer and food, as well as monetary payment, mirrored the custom or 'doleing' at calendar feasts throughout the year. But William Paine of Borough Farm was not the only 'victim' of the Swing crowds to provide beer at the conclusion of 'negotiations' with the crowd. After the carting of

[83] *Morning Chronicle*, 6th November 1830.
[84] HRO Book 328, Shelf 184, *A Report of the Proceedings...*, pp.16-22.

Thomas Abel of Brede, for example, we are told that:

> When we came back...Mr Coleman was there of Chitcomb and he gave every one of us half a pint of Beer women and men and Mr Reed of Brede High gave us a Barrel because we had done such a great thing in the Parish as to carry that man away,

and we have seen how the crowd at Henfield in Sussex was similarly provided for at the successful conclusion of their own 'negotiations'.[86] We can only conjecture why the farmers of Brede should be so pleased with the crowd's treatment of Abel; but the provision of beer clearly echoes the customary ceremony surrounding negotiations and other specific occasions both at work and in the wider community. Margaret Baker indicates that in some places the harvest lord would conclude negotiations with the farmer on behalf of the labourers in just this manner. "Negotiations sometimes went on for half the day before 'dew-beer', to wet the sickle and drink success to the harvest, was sent for".[87] Elsewhere, others have noted the centrality of drink in workplace customs in a range of settings. One observer of the early nineteenth century cotton industry in the north west of England noted:

> The ceremonial whiskey feasts when a spinner 'changes his wheels or gets new wheels' in a factory. 'Footing' was observed when a new hand entered the factory. He bought a round of drinks for his shop-mates 'as a token of his desire to cultivate their friendship and goodwill',

and this accords with John Rule's assertion that "drinking played a large part in the customary culture of the workplace. It was much more than a simple excuse for indulgence. Treating symbolically confirmed the wish to belong".[88] Drink, then – for toasting, celebrating, and affirming solidarity – was central to the customary culture of the labouring population, not just in the south of England but throughout the country and across trade, occupational and demographic boundaries. It's centrality to the Swing disturbances is therefore unsurprising, but again the manner in which it was given or consumed was of great symbolic importance. Often, the crowd would conclude its day's 'work' – of breaking threshing machines, 'negotiating' a more favourable wage, or of exacting levies and donations – by dividing the money it had accumulated and spending a portion of it collectively on drink. This seems to have sealed the compact between those present, and again echoes the element of feasting noted above. Once again, it was invariably done with the utmost decorum and according to a rigid protocol. After Sir

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[85] Bushaway, p.113.
[86] From the deposition of Joseph Bryant, cited in Bushaway, p.200; see above, p.32.
[87] Margaret Baker, *Folklore and Customs of Rural England* (London 1974), p.26.
[88] Anon, quoted in M B Smith, 'The Growth and Development of Popular Entertainment and Pastimes in the Lancashire Cotton Towns' (unpubl. MPhil thesis, University of Lancaster, 1970), p.2; John Rule, 'Against Innovation? Custom and Resistance in the Workplace, 1700-1850' in T Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England, c.1500-1850* (London 1995), p.172.

Thomas Baring's steward, Francis Callendar, was relieved of £10 by the Micheldever crowd, they went to a public house, and were accompanied by Callendar's clerk, William Nusham. He was told by Joseph Carter, the crowd's 'treasurer', to keep account of all the beer that was drawn: "I did so," he said later in evidence, and "I afterwards made out a bill by desire of Joseph Mason, who gave me the paper to do it. Joseph Mason then gave me £5 to pay for the bill".[89] Drink then, and more specifically beer, clearly held a vital place, not only in the celebratory culture of agricultural labourers, but also in the customs and the culture of production relations.

To return to the central figure of the harvest lord, it is important to note that he acted on behalf of the master *and* the men; despite the fact that the men elected him to act as their spokesman and to negotiate on their behalf, they also appointed him to act as an arbiter of their behaviour on behalf of the farmer. He it was that ensured that the customary allocation of beer was meted out fairly, and he guaranteed both the quantity and quality of work done. This, of course, accords very closely with the notion of mutuality noted above; the identity of interests articulated and enshrined in rural customs between all sides in the agricultural production process and all parties to rural community life, to the whole 'communitas' of the farm or village. In the context of 1830, one of the most oft-noted qualities of the Swing crowds was their restraint and – to paraphrase E P Thompson again – their 'unbloodthirstiness'. We have already seen how, at Henfield in Sussex, the crowd, having achieved its aim with regard to the terms of labour, "dispersed without the occurrence of the least unpleasant circumstance". Elsewhere, during the disturbances around Micheldever, Sir Thomas Baring's son, Francis, on being appraised of the crowd's actions on his father's estate, "rushed to Stratton expecting to find a riotous mob but instead met his father at the head of a column of labourers 'looking all very gallant with laurel leaves in their hats'".[90] Like the unsuccessful attempt to enlist Harris Bigg Wither junr., the symbolic inclusion of Sir Thomas (who was later to be such a central figure in the prosecution of those involved in Hampshire's Swing disturbances) as a member of the crowd must have had tremendous symbolic resonance. However, the crowd could have acted very differently towards Thomas Baring as they did, unusually, in the case of the Bigg Withers, and as they did in the case of his own nephew, William Bingham Baring. This restraint, this discipline is commented upon time and again in contemporary accounts of Swing. At Ashford in Kent, a crowd of between 50 and 70

[89] HRO Book 328, Shelf 184, *A Report of the Proceedings...*, p.37.
[90] *South West Journal*, 6th December 1830, quoted in Kent, p.12.

men "presented themselves at Yates, the seat of Lord Torrington. It was stated to them that his Lordship was dangerously ill, and the party retired". Near Chichester, a large crowd "went to every farmer, taking their servants, some from the plough, others from the barns, whom they compelled to join in their cause. They had in no instance recourse to violence, but they demanded provisions, and would not leave the premises of farmers till they obtained their object – an advance of 4s. After this they went quietly to the next farm-house and so on".[91]

In truth, this kind of discipline and order can only be accounted for by a thorough understanding of the precedents for action and behaviour that the labourers took from their own customary culture. As we have already seen, the agricultural labourers who made up the Swing crowds were not bandits, and neither were they without discipline or order. But equally, they did not derive their discipline from deference or from the influence of 'outsiders' by whom they were led: they had no need to. Rather, they looked to their own customary culture for precedents of how they should behave in negotiations with the structurally superior, including those of the harvest lords and the shearers' captains. In its particularities this customary culture differed markedly from region to region and subtlely from village to village. It was essentially a local phenomenon, deriving its moral strength from the shared experiences and conditions that could only be fully appreciated by those who lived and worked in the locality. Nonetheless, it was a customary culture that, in its broadest sense, was shared across the whole of agricultural southern England and beyond. It was this customary culture which informed the protocol of the Swing crowds, and which gave them such a coherent and disciplined aspect to outsiders; and insofar as the Swing crowds across southern England *did* constitute a movement of agricultural labourers, it was this customary culture too that provided not only the cohesion and structure for that movement, but also the values which gave it meaning.

[91] *Morning Chronicle*, 20th November 1830.

CHAPTER 2: Populism, Popular Culture and the Protocol of Swing

When Hobsbawm and Rudé describe the actions of the Swing crowds as "improvised, archaic [and] spontaneous", when E P Thompson calls them "curiously indecisive", they do so as part of a tradition of historians on the left whose response to 'pre-industrial' forms of protest is redolent of what Thompson himself famously called "the enormous condescension of posterity".[1] It has already been noted how the 'movement' of Swing has been (and to a large extent continues to be) treated with this same condescension by historians intent on proving that the "pre-political" poor lacked the "ideological resources" to mount a 'proper' defence against changes in social and production relations to which they were subject.[2] Edward Thompson's place in this tradition is, of course, highly ambivalent: it was Thompson after all who formulated one of the most insightful and influential schema's for interpreting popular action in the eighteenth century with the publication of his 'moral economy' thesis in 1971.[3] But still, this does not excuse him absolutely. His method was to

> reconstruct the paternalist model of food marketing, with protective institutional expression and with emergency routines in time of dearth, which derived in part from earlier Edwardian and Tudor policies of provision and market-regulation; to contrast this with the new political economy in grain...and to show how, in times of high prices and of hardship, the crowd might enforce, with a robust direct action, protective market-control and the regulation of prices, sometimes claiming a legitimacy derived from the paternalist model.[4]

It was, in 1971, a piece of historical polemic whose time had come. Academic interest in 'history from below' was growing exponentially, thanks in no small part to Thompson himself, and the study of popular protest was rapidly taking its place at the vanguard of this movement. But the 'moral economy of the crowd' was seen then, as it has largely been seen since, as operationally possibly only under certain specific economic and social conditions, conditions that are seen to have all but disappeared by the end of the eighteenth century:

> the breakthrough of the new political economy of the free market was also the breakdown of the old moral economy of provision. After the wars all that was left of it was charity – and Speenhamland.

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[1] E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (2nd. edn., London 1968), p.12.
[2] See above, p.13.
[3] E P Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', originally published in *Past and Present*, no.50, 1971.
[4] E P Thompson, 'The Moral Economy Reviewed' in *Customs in Common* (London 1991) p.261.

While he does accept that "[t]he moral economy of the crowd took longer to die", Thompson sees only vestigial traces of it in the nineteenth century:

> it is picked up by the early co-operative flour mills, by some early Owenite socialists, and it lingered on for years somewhere in the bowels of the Co-operative Wholesale Society.[5]

The problem is that something very like the moral economy seems to have been at work in a variety of social and economic settings well into the new century, but it is this 'something like' that has become the main point at issue for historians after Thompson. In their introduction to a recent collection of essays which set out specifically to test the 'moral economy' thesis still further, Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth point out that "[l]arge scale industrial disputes in eighteenth century England shared certain characteristics with the food riot". However, they go on to indicate that while "Thompson conceded that he was "more than half persuaded" by Randall's use of the term 'industrial moral economy' of the Gloucestershire handloom weavers," his main concern was where to place the limits on the use of his thesis: "where are we to draw the line?" he specifically asked.[6] Thompson clearly viewed the 'moral economy' as something which could be applied only where all the conditions for its operation (conditions which he himself had set) were fully met. If it could not be applied to industrial disputes in the eighteenth century, then it most certainly could not be applied to social or economic movements after the "breakthrough of the new political economy of the free market" in the nineteenth.

He was, of course, quite right to make such stipulations: it was his thesis after all, and despite the slightly disingenuous claim that "it has come of age and I am no longer answerable for its actions,"[7] he was the most thorough and precise of polemicists. The problem with the delivery (and subsequent growth to maturity) of his masterly thesis on the eighteenth century food riot is that Thompson left something of a vacuum for the historian of *nineteenth* century popular protest. If we are not to have the 'moral economy' thesis – even a severely tailored version of it – to help us explain the events of Swing and other rural protests, then what model *are* we to use? The response of Thompson himself, as with Hobsbawm and Rudé and a whole raft of other social historians before and since, tended to be to downgrade such protest as "curiously

[5] E P Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century' in *Customs in Common*, p.258.
[6] A Charlesworth and A Randall, 'The Moral Economy: Riot, Markets and Social Conflict' in A Charlesworth and A Randall (eds.), *Moral Economy and Popular Protest: Crowds, Conflict and Authority* (London 1999), p.21.
[7] Thompson, 'The Moral Economy Reviewed', p.351.

indecisive", "archaic", and implicitly futile, the "movements of resistance to the full triumph of rural capitalism". On the one hand, it is argued, the working system of paternalism had gone forever, its demise coinciding with the success, after Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, of the doctrine of political economy. On the other, one essential ingredient for the success of any social, economic or industrial protest in the 'new' age was missing: class. It is this irrevocable lack of class (or rather, of a coherent class consciousness) that condemned the rural labouring population in the first third of the nineteenth century to respond 'archaically' according to this analysis. Situated as they were at a vital intersection in the history of social relations, too late for the 'protections' of paternalism, too early for the solidarity of class action, the measures they took in their own defence were ultimately destined to be futile. The problem with this model for the actions of the crowd in the nineteenth century is that it takes little or no account of the actual social and cultural context of protest. It is essentially a developmental model, viewing such protest as appropriate in a different (i.e. earlier) economic context, but as inappropriate in the new 'reality' of the free market and a rapidly maturing capitalist economy. As far as historical theory goes, this model might be highly satisfactory, exemplary even; but it can remain so only as long as the debate remains purely theoretical. When applied to the actual decisions made, the actions taken, by the historical actors themselves – labourers responding in the real world to the very real conditions of their lives – then it is destined eventually to be challenged as insufficient. In a useful parallel to the current enquiry M D Bristol wrote, in an article on 'Carnival and the Institutions of Theater in Elizabethan England', that

> A frequently encountered strategy is to view the popular tradition through the metaphor of development, so that 'folk' or 'popular' elements are described as early stages in an evolution towards a greater complexity of dramatic art.

He went on to criticize this approach, suggesting that

> using development as the central theoretical concept makes it a foregone conclusion that the popular elements in themselves will have to be characterized as undeveloped [and] naïve...Viewed in the context of a metaphor of development, popular culture tends to appear essentially archaic, fragmentary, and devoid of any coherent positive content. Its participants are perceived as residual survivals of ancient ritual...lacking knowledge and sophistication.[8]

It could be argued that the developmental approach is an example of that very "condescension of posterity" to which Edward Thompson's academic career was so firmly opposed. For unless a commitment is made to read the actions of historical actors

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[8] M D Bristol, 'Carnival and the Institutions of Theater in Elizabethan England' in *ELH*, V.50(4) (1983), pp.638-9.

within their own specific cultural context, then we are destined to carry on looking down on them from atop the high battlements of our own theoretical models.

If the developmental approach and its touchstone of 'class' is insufficient to fully explain the actions of the labouring poor in our period and the consciousness that underpinned them, if it is found to be insufficient as a historical model when taking into account the actual cultural context of those actions and that consciousness, then perhaps there is a need to investigate further to see if it is possible to locate an alternative model which better explains them. It has already been suggested that by looking again at the 'body language' of the Swing disturbances it might be possible to begin to identify the application of a set of values rooted within a coherent popular consciousness. This popular consciousness was seen to be operating in every area of the lives of rural labourers, and models for their actions during the events of 1830 were identified in other social contexts, specifically those of work and the festival calendar. What I want to explore here is the possibility that the popular consciousness of English rural labourers in the first third of the nineteenth century did in fact amount to a coherent set of values which was finely tuned to the particular social and economic conditions within which it operated, and that it was every bit as operationally sophisticated as the consciousness of class which they are so often accused of having lacked. In *Visions of the People*, Patrick Joyce suggests that if we can identify anything like a coherent value system underpinning the social identity of the mass of people in the nineteenth century, then it is not that of 'class', but of a kind of 'populism'. As opposed to 'class', which is

> [e]conomically, socially exclusive, and connoting conflict...'populism' points to a set of discourses and identities which are extra-economic in character, and inclusive and universalizing in their social remit.[9]

The term 'populism' is, of course, itself highly contentious. Within the context of social history it has most often been used to bring order to the untidy bundle of values, prejudices and symbols that made up the 'country platform' of the eighteenth century, and as such it has been a particularly difficult category to pin down. Ian Dyck points to the way in which "populism has been called a 'mood', an 'ethos', 'a syndrome, not a doctrine', and even an ideology", and he goes on to suggest that

> a populist is understood by [most] scholars as someone who is anti-élitist and anti-cosmopolitan, as one who subscribes to a golden-age theory, 'romantic primitivism', and physiocratic economics; the 'populist' is sometimes anti-urban, racialist, usually self-righteous and often anti-intellectual.[10]

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[9] Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People* (Cambridge 1991), p.11.
[10] Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge 1992), pp.10-11.

For Joyce, however, the term 'populism' denotes something very different from the reactionary traditionalism of the country platform. His work is primarily concerned with the industrial north west of England between 1840 and 1914 and the newly urbanised and industrialised populations therein situated. For Joyce, 'populism' as a concept is integral to the creation of social identity for these newly constituted populations. He suggests that when we look again at the evidence, even for this most likely arena for conflict along 'class' lines, "instead of an overmastering, trans-historical tendency towards conflict – along classical Marxist lines – what is evident [within the culture of the labouring population] is the inter-dependence of capital and labour".[11] As a result, he identifies the need to find an alternative model of social discourse which takes account of this cultural inclusiveness, and that model is 'populism'.

I would argue that it is in this sense, as a value system which is "extra economic in character, and inclusive and universalizing" in its social remit, emphasizing the "interdependence of labour and capital", that the concept of 'populism' can be applied to the value system of the rural labouring poor around the time of Swing. This populist identity is one that owes much to they symbolism and rhetoric of its forebear, the populism of the eighteenth century country platform. But there are crucial ways in which it is very differently applied and in which it owes more to the populism of the newly industrialised and urbanised workforce of the north west of England as identified by Joyce. For in the sense that it will be applied below, it is part of the means by which the rural labouring population sought to define its own identity and take control of its destiny, to create the world in its own image, and though it remains, in its broadest sense, "inclusive and universalizing" in its social remit, nonetheless in the particular it actively seeks to exclude those who do not conform to its social norms and values. It is founded upon many sturdy precepts, but one of the sturdiest is the centrality of labour as the source of all social value and personal virtue. As we shall see, those who do not work for their bread are not of its of its number; 'idleness' and ostentation are its keenest targets; and 'pride' is its clearest symptom of moral and social degeneration. Of course, we must be wary of asking too much of the concept of populism. It has already been suggested that, in Isiah Berlin's words, "there exists a shoe – the word "populism" – for which somewhere there exists a foot".[12] But while it is true that the labouring poor never self-consciously applied the 'populist' label to themselves I would argue that the risks

[11] Joyce, p.3.
[12] Quoted in Dyck, *William Cobbett*, p.10.

associated with its application here are risks worth taking. For in order to avoid the pitfalls of 'developmentalism' in our analysis of the consciousness of the rural labouring population we must do our best to identify a social model that encapsulates best the values they applied in their own lives, and populism is probably the closest approximation to that unnamed model that we are likely to find.

i) Reading Popular Culture

In order to locate the populist values of the labouring poor it is necessary to look not only at their actions, but also to interrogate more closely the cultural backdrop to those actions. For it is here, in the operation of popular culture, that the values and beliefs, the mentality of individuals and communities is shaped and affirmed. Popular culture is never merely a collection of expressive forms. It is also a dynamic, dialectical process through which social identities are constantly challenged and re-formed. Part of its role is the assertion of those fluctuating social identities against others which oppose or conflict with them. As Hans Medick has suggested, "popular culture in history is more the expression of a 'whole way of conflict' than some kind of classless 'whole way of life'"[13]: for our purposes, we may wish to substitute 'non-conflictual' for 'classless', but still, the point is well made. For despite Joyce's assertion that populism was in large part defined by its "inclusive and universalising" character – an assessment that greatly informs the present enquiry – it is no contradiction to suggest that the popular culture which enveloped it was an essential part of the vigorous discourse between conflicting social groups, part of a much wider process of social negotiation. The popular culture of the rural labouring poor is, then, central to the formation, affirmation and operation of populist values. The question remains, though, how we are to identify those values as a coherent and applicable system within that popular culture. Already, in Chapter 1, the opacity of the lives of ordinary people in history was alluded to. As a correspondent to Cobbett's *Political Register* pointed out, "nobody tells the tale of the labourer"[14]; and the Hammonds were even more pessimistic when they stated that "the voice of the poor themselves does not come to our ears".[15] It is my contention, however, that with careful

[13] Hans Medick, 'Plebeian Culture in the Transition to Capitalism' in R Samuel and G Stedman Jones (eds.), *Culture, Ideology and Politics*, p.12.
[14] *Political Register*, 22nd February 1823, p.482.
[15] J L and B Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (London 1911), p.243.

consideration it *is* in fact possible to hear that 'voice', and also to suggest that contrary to expectations it is a voice that is remarkably robust.

Kevin Binfield forcefully echoes Bristol's assessment of the 'developmental' model of history and culture when he says that "historians...frequently read Luddism as a series of events either flowing to or from some point of historical significance". He goes on to suggest that

> that limited mode of reading is made possible by historiographical views that acknowledge the existence of Luddite writing but treat it as if it were secondary evidence at best, or, at worst, little more than silence – in John Bohstedt's words, the expression of a 'rage of impotence'.[16]

It is not unfair or unreasonable to suggest, as Binfield does for the 'writings of the Luddites', that until the last decade the phenomenon of popular song in history was either ignored or seriously misrepresented by modern historians. Certainly, a lot of work has been done in this area in recent years by a handful of academics who, by taking an enlightened approach to the popular culture of the early-nineteenth century labouring poor, have been able to suggest valuable ways forward in the use and interpretation of popular songs and ballads as historical evidence. A huge debt is owed to them, and this will become obvious throughout the course of this chapter; but nevertheless still more can and should be done in order to make the most of this vital historical source. Prior to the work of Patrick Joyce, Ian Dyck and Alun Howkins[17], social historians from the Hammonds onwards tended to cite individual songs and ballads in their work. Few, however, did so as anything other than mere illustration of more 'substantive' (or normative) historical sources. On the whole, historians have a problem with the rhetorical nature of popular cultural forms. As Ian Dyck points out specifically in relation to 'rural' songs, the questions surrounding them as evidence are legion.

> Like any genre or text, song is problematic: whose discourse is it? Are country songs so many transcripts of the labourers' consciousness or are they the voice of the dominant culture as articulated by the Grub Street muse? And what is the relationship between oral folk song and printed broadside song in the expressive culture of farm workers?[18]

There is a danger, though, that the historian can become paralysed by the problematic nature of ballads and songs as historical evidence, running the very real risk of ignoring a hugely significant area of the experience of the labouring poor. No-one would seriously

[16] K Binfield, *The Writings of the Luddites* (Forthcoming), pp.4-5.
[17] See Joyce, *Op. Cit.*; Dyck, *William Cobbett*; I Dyck, ''Towards the Cottage Charter': The Expressive Culture of Farm Workers in Nineteenth-Century England' in *Rural History* (1990), v.1(1); and I Dyck & A Howkins, 'The Time's Alteration: Popular Ballads, Rural Radicalism and William Cobbett' in *History Workshop Journal*, No.23 (1987).
[18] Dyck, 'Towards the Cottage Charter', p.96.

suggest that ballads and songs should be used in the same way as other, more formal sources of evidence (court records, say, or parliamentary papers): we cannot simply 'read' them as if they simply presented a realistic snapshot of life. But this should not disqualify ballads and songs from being treated seriously in historical inquiry. In fact, it is precisely their 'problematic', their rhetorical nature that makes them so interesting to the social historian. Here, in the imaginative life of the labouring poor, it may perhaps be possible to gain a real sense of how they actually perceived themselves; possible even to find the 'voice of the poor' as it spoke to itself. But there is far more to it even than that.

'Culture' – the cultural life of the individual and of his or her community – is a complex process that operates on many levels: certainly it involves elements of self-definition and affirmation; but it is also part of a complex dynamic, and expresses the will and the power of individuals and communities to take account of, and to respond to, the changing circumstances of their world. Ballads (and popular culture as a whole) must be viewed as a part of the active process by which ordinary people explored, and explore, the present and the future in terms of a set of values and beliefs which provide some orientation for them because they are rooted in perceived precedents and in long-cherished conventions. What emerges most strongly from even the briefest investigation of the ballad form is the value of continuity for the people who bought them. 'The past' was not something fixed or finished for the singers and composers of popular songs; rather, it was symbolically located in their popular culture, to be applied as a set of values whose authority was derived in perceived notions of precedent and continuity. These values, and the notions in which they are embedded, are central to the construction of populism. The operation of popular culture through which it is articulated is part of the process by which this ever flexible set of values and beliefs shifts to accommodate, facilitate and even to exclude future possibilities. In other words, it is the active reaffirming (through precedent) but also the active challenging (also through the creative application of a sense of precedent) of social identities. It is this dialectical process of challenging and re-affirming identities that Patrick Joyce identifies as "the most important function of the ballad".[19] In order to take account of this dynamic process historians cannot afford to treat ballads as though they represent some kind of bald social indicator, some kind of reflective 'mirror to man': they must guard against the temptation to deconstruct individual songs as though they can be analysed against 'real' empirical

[19] Joyce, p.240.

evidence like still photographs. Instead, we must consciously re-invent the way that we view this aspect of history; respond in kind to this most creative human endeavour by building a conceptual framework within which we are able to read the ballads and songs of the labouring poor legitimately alongside other forms of historical evidence, whilst avoiding the trap of reducing them to "the level of mere illustrative material, fascinating maybe but marginal".[20] Building on the work of Patrick Joyce and Ian Dyck, the aim of this chapter is to construct a historically legitimate model of the way that rural popular song assisted in the creation and adaptation of a popular consciousness that can be described as in many ways 'populist'. Before we move on to this, however, it is necessary to return briefly to the vexed question of 'authenticity'.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that the 'problematic' nature of popular songs and ballads has caused historians great heartache. As Roger Elbourne points out of the handloom weaving ballads in circulation in the north-west of England at the beginning of the nineteenth century,

> it is seriously misleading to assume without further evidence, on the basis of their content alone, that these were printed versions of songs in oral circulation in the weaving communities...[and] though their feeling sometimes makes it difficult to believe otherwise, neither is there any definitive proof that ballads written about weavers were necessarily by weavers.[21]

Once again to paraphrase Ian Dyck, there is no way of knowing where such songs originated: did they transfer 'authentically' from oral to printed form? Or were they merely knocked up in a garret in Shude Hill, Manchester's own Grub Street? And what would either of these origins tell us about their circulation and popularity among handloom weavers or the wider labouring community? Of course, such questions would be of vital importance if we were looking to the ballads to show us some kind of empirical reality. But they become somewhat less important if our academic focus shifts away from the truth of 'how handloom weavers really lived', and towards the place of the ballads and songs *within* those lives. There is no doubt that broadside ballads were incredibly popular in the early-nineteenth century. Contemporary references to ballads and songs in the press, as well as in many anecdotal accounts of rural and urban life, testify to their popularity, and the sheer number that languish in archive collections confirms it. We also know that the larger metropolitan ballad-mongers could, by the early years of the nineteenth century, dispose of up to 250,000 copies of a single broadside, and that their catalogues might feature as many as 5,000 titles. Even in the

[20] R Elbourne, *Music and Tradition in Early Industrial Lancashire (1780-1840)* (London 1980), p.124.

provinces, it has been suggested that a publisher may have been able to offer up to 200 titles at any one time.[22] The question of whether or not a specific song was popular is, of course, much harder to gauge, but it is still sometimes possible to answer it. A few songs were printed and re-printed throughout the nineteenth century: some popular ballad characters went on to a kind of notoriety of their own above and beyond the original song setting, starring in many subsequent ballads over a period of decades. One of the best known examples of this is Jone O'Grinfilt, who originated as the eponymous hero of a ballad in the north-west of England somewhere in the 1820s or 1830s, and went on to star in many more throughout the century.[23] The degree to which a song enters the consciousness of the labouring poor is probably best reflected nowadays in the number of times it appears in the archives and collections that remain. Some ballads reappear many times, sometimes under different titles and often with minor or, as in the case of the original Jone O'Grinfilt ballad, with major revisions to suit the changing times. However, many appear only once or twice in the collections. How, then, is it possible to seriously treat *these* songs within the context of popular history?

The question that first needs to be asked is, exactly what is it we are looking to discover from popular culture and popular song? The possibility that ballads and songs can help to illuminate an objective historical 'reality', some kind of empirical truth, has already been ruled out. What we are looking for, then, are *trends*, movements within popular culture that will help to build the conceptual framework mentioned above so that it is possible to read the place that it – popular culture – held in the lives and the consciousness of the early-nineteenth century labouring population. Individual ballads therefore become far less important than genres of song, or repeated themes, which may point towards those trends and movements.[24] For as Joyce suggests, when it comes to popular song "the individual may invent, but 'the community' selects".[25] It is this process of 'community selection' which is the most important measure of 'authenticity'. The

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[21] Elbourne, pp.73-4.
[22] D Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture* (London 1989), pp.197-205. For an account of the nineteenth century ballad trade, see especially L Shepard, *Curiosities of Street Literature* (London 1966); J S Bratton, *The Victorian Popular Ballad* (London 1975); J Harland and T T Wilkinson, *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire, Ancient and Modern* (London 1875); and C Hindley, *The Life and Times of James Catnach (Late of Seven Dials) Ballad Monger* (London 1878).
[23] See, for example, 'Yung Jone O'Grinfilt', 'Jone O'Grinfield's Return', 'Jone O'Greenfelt Goin to th' Russian War', 'Joan o'Grinfilt's Visit to Lunnun, to see what the State Doctor intends to do for the Nation', and even 'Joan O'Grinfield Turned Tee-totaler', all of which can be found in Oldham Library's Local History Collection.
[24] Except in the case of songs where we have evidence that they *were* highly popular at a certain point in history: then they may, perhaps, take their place as archetypes.

degree to which a ballad or song corresponded to the expectations and the needs of the wider community dictated its popularity; only when it did so keenly could it have become 'authentic' in the sense of joining the vast canon of popular literature in general circulation. As Ian Dyck suggests, the issue of establishing the actual authorship of popular songs and ballads is "a fruitless and needless task"; for as the *National Review* suggested in 1861,

> [ballads and songs] are almost always written by persons of the class to which they are addressed; and the very sameness of them, the family likeness which runs through each separate branch of them, shows that they are adapted to meet the wants and views of that class.[26]

Elsewhere, Dyck puts forward this useful thumbnail definition of popular song in history:

> [it] is neither more nor less than a song in the possession of a social class. It matters not who composed the song: what matters is its meaning, and the freedom of a class to accept, reject and revise its message according to the dynamic of experience.[27]

The next task is to unlock that meaning, and to suggest the place it may have held in the consciousness of the rural labouring poor.

ii) 'The People's History' and the Constitution of Populism

It has already been shown how Patrick Joyce has used the concept of 'populism' to describe the values of the mass of people in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Central to his application of the concept is the function and operation of popular culture. It is only by studying the "imaginative life" of the labouring population, he argues, that a truly 'contextualised perspective' can be achieved on how they created, maintained and reformed their own social identity.

> This contextualised perspective on meaning in fact makes one keenly aware just how important for an understanding of class discourse these forms of imaginative life were: the social order was not simply 'out there' in social and economic structures, but 'in here', being actively constructed in the imaginative life of audiences.

He goes on to say that "economic relationships, however exploitative (in the technical or moral sense) present themselves to people in countless ways, conditioned by culture and circumstances".[28] Despite the fact that Joyce's work is mostly concerned with the textile workers of the north west of England between 1840 and 1914, his perspective has much wider applications. For the problems that have arisen when historians have attempted to describe the lives and experiences of the rural labouring population of England in the first

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[25] Joyce, p.75.
[26] Quoted in Roy Palmer, *The Sound of History* (Oxford 1988), p.13.
[27] Dyck, 'Cottage Charter', *op. cit.*, p.107.

third of the nineteenth century are precisely those that Joyce describes for the wider labouring population throughout the century. The developmental model, along with the wholesale application of the divisive categories of class, has, when applied to the actions of the Swing crowds, resulted in their actions being dismissed as "archaic", "curiously indecisive" and implicitly futile. Essentially, what is missing in this model is Joyce's 'contextualised perspective'; the ability to 'see' the actions of the early-nineteenth century rural labouring population within the context of their own cultural norms, rather than reflectively, in the ideological mirror of class.

One of the most popular ballad genres throughout the nineteenth century is one that has subsequently been dubbed by historians the 'complaint ballad'. This comprised ballads and songs which, in the words of Ian Dyck and Alun Howkins,

> stated social and economic grievances [but] seldom offered solutions to these problems, or at least not ones recognised as such by modern historians. Where they have been used as sources, they have been seen as inarticulate on politics if eloquent on problems.[29]

'Complaint ballads' cut across the occupational spectrum: they frequently appear as songs which deal directly with the newly industrialised trades, and especially cotton spinning and cotton handloom weaving. For the purposes of the present discussion, however, the focus is on an important and prolific sub-genre of 'complaint ballads' which articulate the grievances of the rural labouring population. A prime example of this sub-genre is a song entitled 'The New Fashioned Farmer' which emerged in the first third of the nineteenth-century, almost certainly a short time after the end of the French wars[30]. In it, the manners and behaviour of the 'modern' farmer are vividly contrasted with those of his predecessors:

> When masters liv'd as masters ought,
> And happy in their station,
> Until at length, their stinking pride,
> Has ruined all the nation.

When Dyck and Howkins write of the way in which ballads such as 'The New Fashioned Farmer' are "seen as inarticulate on politics", they allude most forcefully to the operation of what historians have tended to characterise as the 'golden age myth', something that has already been identified as central to the normative understanding of the 'populism' of the eighteenth century 'country platform':

> The difficulty [that historians had with the] remedies presented in the ballads [was that]

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[28] Joyce, pp.3, 225, 16.
[29] Dyck and Howkins, p.21.
[30] 'The New Fashioned Farmer', see Appendix.

> these clearly did not 'fit' with any twentieth century notions of political action. This was explained by concepts like 'mediation', 'hegemony' or political naivety. Thus the songs were seen as presenting a set of problems...which define the songs in relation to some prior reality of 'working class experience', while the explanations offered by the songs are reduced to a 'golden age myth'.[31]

In actual fact, the so-called 'golden age myth' is clearly the narrative thread that binds this kind of song together; it is evident in the persistent comparison of the 'new fashioned' farmer, his wife and family, with the "good old fashioned" farmer of "former times". As Dyck and Howkins suggest, historians have long found conceptual or ideological difficulties in the widespread operation of the 'golden age myth' within popular culture, and Roger Elbourne's assessment that "the main purpose of these songs seems to be cathartic rather than inflammatory" clearly mirrors the tone of those other historians we have already noted who view the actions of the Swing crowd as "archaic" and the "last movement of resistance".[32] Again, it is an example of the developmental model being applied to history and (in this case) culture, and it is instructive to return to the useful assessment of this model made by M D Bristol:

> A frequently encountered strategy [among historians] is to view the popular tradition through the metaphor of development, so that 'folk' or 'popular' elements are described as early stages in an evolution towards a greater complexity of dramatic art...Using development as the central theoretical concept makes it a foregone conclusion that the popular elements in themselves will have to be characterized as undeveloped [and] naïve.[33]

For Elbourne, as for many other historians, the tenacious adherence of the labouring poor to a 'golden age myth' is a clear indication of their lack of a 'progressive' (i.e. class) consciousness, the result of which is to render their culture "cathartic rather than inflammatory": it is unable to offer any kind of 'progressive' (i.e. class-conscious) remedy for the problems it describes, and is therefore condemned to be purely reactionary. However, if we look again at the application of the 'golden age' in these ballads we can perhaps offer a much more nuanced and sophisticated explanation for its pervasiveness. In 'The New Fashioned Farmer' it is his forebear who "liv'd as masters ought" and is noted for his restraint, his lack of pretension and, crucially, his industry. His modern counterpart, on the other hand, is characterised by opulence, idleness and show: he dresses "Like any lord or squire" to impress his landlord and rides a "fine gelding"; his wife, in turning towards gentility, has taken to drinking 'swipes' (or small beer); and his daughters are "frilled and furbelowed,/Just like a dancing monkey".

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[31] Dyck & Howkins, p.21.
[32] Elbourne, p.86.
[33] M D Bristol, 'Carnival and the Institutions of Theatre in Elizabethan England', pp.638-9.

Clearly, there is a sophisticated dialectic in operation here: the 'new' and the 'old fashioned' farmer operate as archetypes, and are placed in direct opposition in the ballad. Equally clearly, it is left to the reader or singer of the song to judge for him or herself which of them is acting in accordance with 'legitimate' norms of social behaviour, and which has broken or gone beyond these norms. Having made such a judgement, of course, the reader or singer has automatically placed him or herself firmly on one side of the barricades.

In this sense, the 'golden age myth' so prevalent in the popular culture of the early-nineteenth century labouring population becomes something very different and rather more muscular than is suggested by the analysis of Elbourne and many other historians. Rather than being 'cathartic' or arcane, it comes to signify a set of values which are very much alive, and in their operation very powerful. It has already been suggested that popular culture is part of an active process by which, among other things, 'the people' explores and describes the world in terms of a set of values rooted in perceived precedents. Here, in 'The New Fashioned Farmer', it is possible to see this process very much in action. For those who read the ballad (or sang it themselves, or at least heard it sung) the empirical truth of how farmers behaved in "former times" was of far less importance than the fact that, as an archetype, the 'old fashioned farmer' embodied a set of values which conformed to the people's own, whereas the 'new fashioned farmer' had clearly departed from these values. The key to this ballad is that the values it articulates gain their strength and legitimacy from perceived precedent; from what is *presented* at least as historical fact. This is a very different proposition to the view that the 'golden age myth' in popular culture is merely the nostalgic yearning for a bygone age, the harking back of a downtrodden labouring population to a 'better' or 'more just world', and that as a result (in A L Lloyd's words) "consolation is one of the most powerful functions" of this kind of popular song.[34] In this interpretation, far from being an indication of weakness it is this sense of history, of long-cherished precedent, which gives the message of the 'The New Fashioned Farmer' its strength. These 'long-cherished' precedents may, in reality, be of relatively recent origin; they may even be largely fictitious in the form that they are presented in the songs. In Chapter 1 we saw how 'donations' of money, food and beer were exacted from farmers and others by the Swing crowds, and how these 'donations' or 'doles' were themselves legitimised by the

[34] A L Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London 1969), p.100.

precedents set in other social and customary contexts – in this instance, Saints day doles and the custom of crying largesse at harvest. It is in exactly this way that the sense of precedent operated in the songs and ballads of the labouring poor as well. It is of little consequence how empirically provable the history presented in the ballads and songs was: in the event the customs of Saints day doleing and of crying largesse, insofar as they were understood by the Swing crowds, were themselves just as likely have been of relatively recent origin, and it is almost certain that they had never actually operated elsewhere in exactly the form adopted by those crowds. It is in this sense, though, as agents of legitimation, that 'history' and precedent were of vital importance to the operation of popular culture. As Patrick Joyce points out, "custom was about the legitimation of social practices [which] involved the deployment of the notion of an historical sense", and the same can and should be said of popular culture as well.[35]

When we describe the "deployment of the notion of an historical sense" in ballads like 'The New Fashioned Farmer', there is a sense in which we are also describing the widely recognised process by which social groups of varying degrees of institutional cohesion 'create' or define their identities in relation to a particular version of history. In her journal article on the creation of Chartist identity, Dorothy Thompson asks the question, 'Who Were 'the People' in 1842?' and answers that, for Chartists at least, the broad category of 'the people' came to denote specifically the working or labouring classes. Similarly, Robert G Hall has recently written of the way in which Chartism, "a decentralized, loosely federated movement", sought, through its pamphlets and lectures, to describe the history of this version of 'the people' which would place them at centre stage. He goes on to suggest that

> by choosing to emphasize the role of "the great mass of the population", or the working classes, in history, [Chartists] tried to move beyond the narrow definitions of historical causation and 'the people' in Whig and Conservative accounts.[36]

In alluding to "'the people' in Whig and Conservative accounts" of history, Hall also points the way in which these other groups made use of a much older or more established version of the 'the people's' history to define themselves; a version which chimed much more closely with the populism of the country platform noted above, but which nonetheless varied in interpretation according to the particular ideological needs of

[35] Joyce, p.145.

[36] D Thompson, 'Who Were 'the People' in 1842?' in M Chase and Ian Dyck (eds.), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J F C Harrison* (Aldershot, Hampshire 1996); Robert G Hall, 'Creating A People's History: Political identity and history in Chartism, 1832-1848' in O Ashton, R Fyson and S Roberts (eds.), *The Chartist Legacy* (London 1999).

whichever group employed it. It is in exactly this way that Joyce's "historical sense" was used by *our* broad social category of 'the people' to define its own history and, thus, to legitimise its own set of values. Hall also usefully points to the way that the chosen means of propagating these histories, the media through which these diverse social and political coalitions – Radicals, Chartists, Whigs and Tories – sought to articulate their own particular historical identities, was very different. Suggesting that "in 1830...['conventional'] history was typically the province of members of the legal profession, clergymen, journalists, politicians, and men (and women) of letters", he indicates that, on the contrary, Chartists

> struggled to create a radical people's history, one that was primarily oral and visual in its form, as an alternative to Whig and Conservative interpretations of the past and to the expensive, text bound histories of the world of print[37].

On the other hand, the populist version of history, the history of our inclusive category of 'the people', was very clearly articulated through the medium of popular culture: it is in ballads and songs such as 'The New Fashioned Farmer' that it is possible to see the 'historical sense' in operation. 'The people' as here defined was not a politically or demographically coherent group which coalesced around a particular orthodoxy. Rather, it was a loose coalition of those who held to and cherished the precepts of populism, a creed not to be found within the terms of a Charter, nor in any political programme, nor even in the status of one's birth or ancestry, or in the tools of one's trade. It is, then, only natural that such a loosely constituted coalition should find a diffuse and flexible medium such as popular song through which to articulate and affirm its identity.

What is being suggested, then, is that 'the people' is an identifiable social category in the first third of the nineteenth century and that its self-conscious reflection can be located in much of the popular culture of the period; that its identity and values (the values of populism) were articulated with reference to a specifically constructed, though interpretively flexible, history in exactly the same way as any other social group; and that this was a history that was articulated through the agency of popular culture. It is, though, a very different kind of identity, and a very different kind of history, that applies to the broad social category of 'the people' than to that of, say, Chartists, or to Whigs, or Tories, or to any other more structurally coherent or formally constituted social group. One of the ways that the identity of 'populism' and its constituent group, 'the people', differs markedly from other social identities is that it is constituted in ways that stand in direct

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[37] Hall, pp.234-5.

opposition to the structures and practices of officially constituted social groups, no matter what their political or ideological complexion. This, of course, makes it extremely difficult to locate within the strictures of purely empirical history: one way forward, though, is suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin's approach to 'carnival' in medieval Europe. Bakhtin suggests that carnival, local ceremony and ritual celebration were

> forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition...They were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal and political cult forms and ceremonials...they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less.[38]

This, I would suggest, is as good a thumbnail definition of how populism and our social category of 'the people' is constituted as we are likely to find. The protocols of carnival, based on laughter and consecrated by tradition, are closely mirrored by the protocols of populism as articulated in the ballads. It is clear that the expression of the values of populism were "consecrated by tradition" in the songs of the labouring poor through what has been interpreted by posterity as the 'golden age myth' and by Patrick Joyce as the "historical sense". It is also true that, like carnival, the ballad is first and foremost an entertainment, and just like Bakhtin's medieval carnival it is *street* entertainment. There is, however, no essential conflict between the needs of ballads and songs as forms of entertainment and their role as the expression of 'the people's' identity, just as there is none in the case of carnival: in fact, as Bakhtin suggests, 'laughter' – the definition of which, in the case of the ballads, we need to expand to include mockery, parody and even pathos – is integral to this identity: it is laughter which distinguishes it from official reality. For in late-Hanoverian England with its bloody penal code, just as in medieval Europe, laughter "overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority".[39] Laughter is the means by which the people explored and articulated ideas about, and visions of, the social world which would otherwise have been prohibited: parody was the people's means of saying what would otherwise have been proscribed by law, tradition or protocol. Thus, in their singing of 'The New Fashioned Farmer', ordinary people in the village or town could speak openly of the "stinking pride" of their masters and social 'betters', and could mock their opulence, their greed and conceit, without fear and without inhibition.

Unlike the histories and identities of other constituent social groups, the articulation of populism (the history and identity of the broad and inclusive social

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[38] M Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World.* (New York 1965), pp.196-7.
[39] Bakhtin, p.209.

category of the people) through ballads and songs was thoroughly *un*official. It's idiom was what Bakhtin identifies as the language of the marketplace, central to which were all "the unofficial elements of speech"; its "sense of history" and legitimising precedents were, as in the case of the "good old fashioned" farmer, those that existed only in the memory of the people themselves. In this, it stands in direct opposition even to those anti-establishment identities such as Radicalism or Chartism which have themselves been described as movements of 'the people', and which may have appeared as in some ways contrary to, or essentially conflictual with, the constituted authorities. As Robert Hall illustrates, in the creation of its own history Chartism drew upon some of the most cherished conventions of British history, "tracing the historical origins of their movement and its programme through 1688 to the Magna Carta", and blending them with

> stories about the Anglo-Saxon past, the French Revolution, Thomas Paine, Robert Emmet, the 'Ludding Times', Peterloo, and other key episodes and personalities in the radical past.

It was also a history that was formal in its telling: in contrast to the people's unofficial idiom of ballads and songs, of the language of the marketplace, the Chartist narrative unfolded in a series of formal lectures and pamphlets, in "speeches and toasts, commemorative rituals and ceremonies".[40] Certainly, in these other anti-establishment identities, it may be possible to identify opportunities or moments when the unofficial language of the marketplace, of our version of 'the people', becomes consciously employed – at a mass meeting, say, or even in a 'Chartist' ballad or song.[41] In fact, at such times it is even possible to see the way in which our broad social category of 'the people' itself becomes the subject of Chartism or Radicalism, even becoming its motive force. But this is very different from suggesting that most of those who bought the ballad or attended the meeting *considered themselves primarily as Chartists*. Far more likely is that in order to broaden its appeal as widely as possible, the language (and therefore, to an extent, the message) of a meeting or a ballad was self-consciously tailored to the crowd's own populist language, imagery and symbolism, and that as a result it reinforced the crowd's prior identity of the broad and inclusive social category of 'the people'. In other words, Chartism and other radical movements utilised the idiom and the social arenas of 'the people' in order to propagate their messages, rather than the social category of 'the people' being in some way formed or defined, either by the message or the form of these movements. At various times the political aims of Chartism or Reformism, and the broad

[40] Hall, pp.233, 239.

[41] See, for example, 'The Chartist Song', Bodleian Library, Oxford: Harding B15(43a); and 'The Chartists Are Coming', British Library: 1876.d.41, V.2(ii).

political outlook of Radicalism, might – indeed would – have cut across the shifting boundaries of 'the people's' own social identity: the widespread dissemination of the aims and ideologies of these movements must have influenced the way that these boundaries shifted and the way that the very identity of 'the people' developed. But this is very different from suggesting that the two were in some way identical or coterminous.

To return to Dorothy Thompson's question, 'Who were 'the people' in 1842?', it seems to me that in actual fact they were not essentially very different to 'the people' in 1830, or for that matter (if we are persuaded by Patrick Joyce's argument) to 'the people' in 1850, 1860, or 1870. Within the rhetoric of the Chartist platform, between committed Chartists, and at lectures on Chartist history, she may well be quite right to identify 'the people' as the working classes or the labouring classes. Gareth Stedman Jones, for example, suggests that "what was specific to Chartism was...the equation of the people with the working classes as a result of 1832", a view which is entirely consistent with the views of Thompson and Robert Hall as far as Chartists themselves were concerned.[42] Elsewhere, however, in the midst of the crowd at the Chartist mass meeting, and even in the 'Chartist' ballad or song that commemorated that meeting, 'the people' remained somewhat different, a broader and more inclusive social category.

iii) Songs and the Realisation of Populism

Clearly, 'The New Fashioned Farmer' is presented within the context of a vibrant and active process of popular cultural sanction as a man who has stepped beyond the norms and values of 'the people', the buyers, singers and readers of the ballad. His "stinking pride,/Has ruined all the nation"; it has made "poor servants' wages low,/And keeps them in subjection". The symptoms of his crime are listed: he rides a fine gelding to hounds and dresses like a lord; he allows his wife her pretensions of gentility and indulges his daughter's taste for fashions and grand Balls. None of this would carry sufficient moral weight, however, if it were not for the example of what has gone before, the historical sense, against which it is contrasted.

> A good old fashioned long grey coat,
> The farmers used to wear, Sir,
> And on old Dobbin they would ride,
> To market or to fair, Sir,
> -----

[42] G Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge 1983), p.48.

> The good old dame, God bless their names,
> Were seldom in a passion,
> But strove to keep a right good house,
> And never thought on fashion.
> -----
> [The farmer's daughters'] dress was always plain and warm,
> When in their holiday clothes, Sir,
> Besides, they had such handsome cheeks,
> As red as any rose, Sir.

The 'old fashioned farmer' is the people's archetype; a good man and a good farmer. But more than this, he is *one of them*; he is a populist. He rode old Dobbin, not to hounds, but to the market and the fair, the people's own social arenas; he'd "go to Church on Sunday,/And then to harrow, plow or sow" on Monday, alongside his men. What is more, his wife and children could count themselves among the ranks of 'the people' too: "The good old dames...strove to keep a right good house" and cheered their hearts with "fine brown beer"; farmer's daughters "used to work,/All at the spinning wheel, Sir,/But, now, such furniture as that,/Is thought quite ungenteel, Sir". Clearly, then, the archetypal 'old fashioned farmer' was part of the broad social category of 'the people', and that by the reckoning of the people themselves. Yet for all this, his status is very different from that of the labourers, his hired servants.

The social category of the people – the whole ideology of populism – is founded upon the principle of a legitimate economic hierarchy. For 'the people', this most 'inclusive and universalising' concept, extends, as we have already suggested, to anyone who lives by and adheres to the precepts of populism. In this context, the category of the people is not, as Dorothy Thompson suggests it was within the rhetoric of Chartism, limited to a particular social class or occupational group. Nowhere in the popular songs of the time is there any suggestion that farmers are to be disbarred from the ranks of the people simply because of their roles as capitalists and employers – in fact, quite the opposite is true. The values of populism dictated that each party in the social compact had its legitimate role, a role that was *dependent* upon his or her social and economic status rather than one that existed despite it. In a similar vein, John Rule has pointed to the way that custom and tradition were powerfully evoked by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century workforce, not in opposition to capitalism, but in order to mitigate its worst excesses. He suggests that

> customary culture is not the simple antithesis of 'market culture'. The culture of the wage-dependent artisan was in itself the product of a capitalist market economy, yet it presumed that the forces of the labour market and the distribution of power within it should be

> restrained by custom and the claimed rights of labour.[43]

'The New Fashioned Farmer' is in no sense a levelling song: it is accepted that despite his populism the 'old fashioned' farmer is also a capitalist and an employer, and as such he is perfectly entitled to his profits. This accounts – at least in part – for historians' assessment that the ballads and songs of the labouring poor were "inarticulate on politics if eloquent on problems".[44] However, this acceptance is contingent on a prior understanding that his role as a capitalist employer brings with it certain clearly defined responsibilities to his labourers: as the chorus of the song makes clear, it is first incumbent upon him to fill hungry bellies and to pay decent wages to his servants; only then is he entitled to count, and to enjoy, his wealth. What has forced the 'new fashioned' farmer outside the category of 'the people' is his "stinking pride", his "confounded pride" which "makes poor servant's wages low,/And keeps them in subjection".

Pride is the key. If populism is founded on the notion of a legitimate economic hierarchy, of each to his or her station, then it is also founded upon the precept that that station is a *given* – God-given in fact – and that with it come certain given duties and responsibilities to the other parties in the social compact which are immutable and non-negotiable. As a result, one's given status must necessarily entail a degree of humility; humility in the face of God, the provider, but also humility in one's dealings towards the other parties in the social compact. For populism dictates that the responsibilities and obligations of any one party in the compact are of equal value and necessity to those of any other. It has already been suggested that this version of populism owes much to the symbolism and rhetoric of its forebear, the populism of the eighteenth century 'country platform', and this is certainly the case in its employment of many of the rhetorical flourishes of eighteenth century paternalism. In its insistence on an economic hierarchy with legitimate but separate roles for each party in the social compact and a set of interlocking duties and responsibilities that come with them, a very clear mirror is evident of the paternalism of the eighteenth century. However, by the time 'The New Fashioned Farmer' came to be written, something had clearly interrupted the normal operation of these legitimate social relations, and that something is identified as the 'pride' of the farmers. Crucially, this pride is illustrated in 'The New Fashioned Farmer' by their conceits and pretensions, and it is here that a significant problem for labourers and for the

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[43] J Rule, 'Against Innovation? Custom and Resistance in the Workplace, 1700-1850' in T Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England, c.1500-1850* (London 1995), p.185.

[44] Dyck and Howkins, p.21; see above, p.52.

stability of the populist model of society is identified. The symptoms of this pride are listed in detail: fine geldings, a desire to ape the squire, drinking 'swipes' and attending balls. Its result for the labourers – subjection and low wages – seem almost to be secondary to the description of these conceits and pretensions. There is an entirely coherent explanation for this within the framework of populism. For if, as is the case in 'The New Fashioned Farmer', one party in the social compact is seen to have strayed from its legitimate economic role then the fulfilment of the given responsibilities that are incumbent upon this role will *of necessity* become jeopardised. Much of the strength of the values embodied in populism is derived from the fact that they *are* transcendent in origin, and therefore transcendent also in their legitimacy: this is not a man-made system and no man, or class of men, has any right to alter it for personal gain.

This transcendental appeal is even more explicit in another song entitled 'Gentlemen Farmers', an early example of the genre which first appeared in 1783.[45] Within the text of this ballad there is a consistent reference to the breaking of a transcendent, God-given code: "Gentlemen farmers pray remember,/That one God did make us all,/And let us have provisions cheaper,/For to feed our children small"; "you starve the poor of England, which offends Almighty God". The message of 'Gentlemen Farmers' is, in essence, the same as that of 'The New Fashioned Farmer': pride has led farmers away from their legitimate role so that once again "You and your wives are dress'd and powder'd,/The richest cloaths you can devise", and "A prancing horse, your boots and fours on,/To pay your rents away you ride". Joyce's "historical sense" is again clearly evident: the moral strength of the song comes from a contrast of the behaviour of the new breed of 'Gentlemen Farmers' with that of their forefathers "No more than three score year ago":

> The farmers wives would spin their gowns,
> In which they made a comely show;
> The farmers wore a suit of lindsey*,
> When they trudg'd to pay their rent,
> Which plainly shew'd their great industry,
> And gave the landlords great content.
> *'Linsey-woolsey' is a traditional coarse-woven cloth of cotton warp and woollen weft.

Here, though, the pride of 'Gentlemen Farmers' has taken them so far outside that transcendent moral code that there can only be one explanation: "The devil has taught you how to farm". Clearly, their behaviour is so fundamentally opposed to how farmers 'should' conduct themselves according to the transcendent code of populism that it can

[45] 'Gentlemen Farmers', see Appendix The fact that this song appeared before the end of the French wars is

only be Old Nick himself who has led them to it. And at the end of the ballad, lest the message be misunderstood, the narrative voice states directly: "I think the Devil's possessed you all". In many ways, the operation of this transcendent moral code is a parallel of what was described as the 'liminal' quality of other social rituals in Chapter 1, social rituals that clearly informed the protocols of the Swing crowds.[46] In the articulation of populism in the ballads and songs of the labouring poor it is possible to see an example of the same kind of process that we saw at work during the Swing disturbances, a process which involved the creation of

> 'a moment in and out of time', and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition...of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of social ties.

In essence, this "generalized social bond" – which is the same as Turner's 'communitas' – is opposed to the normative rules of structure, and it is the fundamental currency of populism. It is the recognition that, at their very heart, human relationships cannot simply be reduced to "ties organized in terms of either caste, class, or rank hierarchies"; that there must be something 'more', or (taking into account the transcendent nature of the populist moral code) perhaps 'greater', to the social experience than this. This anti-structural aspect of populism, however, cannot exist in its purest form for long. As Turner suggests, it "soon develops a structure [of its own], in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae".[47] Within the ballads and songs such as 'The New Fashioned Farmer' and Gentlemen Farmers', we can identify these "norm-governed relationships" as the 'legitimate' economic hierarchy of landowners, occupiers and labourers. The essence of the "generalized social bond", of 'communitas', remains, however, in the insistence of the ballads' narrative voice that such legitimacy rests on the fulfilment of the obligations and responsibilities to one another which are attendant on all the parties in this hierarchy.

It is possible to identify, then, two clear ways in which the dialogue of 'populism' derives its legitimacy in these ballads, and they are of course two of the most powerful legitimising forces available: God's law and the power of the past. It is in the operation of these powerful legitimising forces, and in the ordained hierarchy with its immutable responsibilities and obligations, that we can see vestiges of paternalism in operation within the populist model of society long after the end of the eighteenth century. The

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itself significant, and is a subject to which we will return later.

[46] See above, pp.33-4.

[47] V Turner, *The Ritual Process: structure and anti-structure* (2nd. edn., New York 1977), pp.96, 132.

crucial difference between the truly paternalist social model and that of populism, however, lies in the right of one party to the social compact to compel another to fulfil its obligations when they have been clearly abrogated; a right which in turn assumes that the broad social category of 'the people' (which, in populism, is envisioned as an undifferentiated whole made up of all those who form the legitimate hierarchy) is empowered to decide when such an abrogation has taken place. It has already been suggested that what has been dubbed the 'golden age myth' in reality operated in the popular culture of the labouring poor as a dynamic and legitimising force; it was also a means by which the dialogue of 'populism' could be infused with a powerful sense of injustice, and thus it was a means of galvanising the people to take action in their own defence. Again, to quote to Victor Turner,

> liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man's relationship to society, nature and culture. But they are more than classifications, since they incite men to action as well as to thought.[48]

Far from being "cathartic", then, the songs of the labouring poor were in fact part of this process, the process by which the labouring population explored alternative social realities within the context of the ongoing process of social negotiation. Joyce, too, has identified this function of popular culture – a function he calls "demotic utopianism" – and he suggests that it can be seen in the appeal to masters to adhere to standards and practices sanctioned by perceived precedents and an often recently constructed (or at least construed) sense of the past.[49] In 'The New Fashioned Farmer' and 'Gentlemen Farmers' the alternative social reality that is being considered is the populist model of social and production relations whereby masters behaved more like their forebears and fulfilled their responsibilities to their men. It consists of a set of value-laden attributes which, taken together, made up the 'legitimate' role of the farmer. In these two ballads we can clearly see these attributes articulated both in the negative and in the positive. They involved riding "old Dobbin", not fine geldings; harrowing, ploughing and sowing on a Monday, not jumping over hedges in pursuit of foxes. They also involved farmers' wives striving "to keep a right good house", not filling their heads with fashions and their bellies with 'swipes'. And they involved farmers' daughters wearing plain, warm dress, not bonnets and great black veils; spinning yarn or mopping the floor, not playing recitals at the piano. It is only by 'returning' to these behavioural norms that farmers would bring themselves

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[48] Turner, pp.128-9.

back within the value system (and thus the social category) of the people: only then would they be likely to return to the populist system of social relations within which they would treat their servants well, filling hungry bellies, paying a decent wage and not keeping them "in subjection".

iv) Populism in Action

One of the dangers of making use of such a contentious and traditionally inexact concept as 'populism' is that in our attempt to define it, it simply becomes a magic bowl, taking the shape of whatever mix the empirical and ideological ingredients we choose to throw in it assume. To repeat Ian Dyck's injunction, "populism has been called a 'mood', an 'ethos', 'a syndrome, not a doctrine', and even an ideology", and even Patrick Joyce resorts to calling his version of populism nothing more precise than "a set of discourses".[50] It is important, then, to aim for something considerably more coherent in the present use of the concept. If its values are to be usefully located anywhere then it is within the popular culture of the labouring poor, and it has been suggested that one particularly fruitful source is ballads and songs. This of course brings its own problems: the people's history and identity in the ballads and songs was constructed informally, unofficially; it was constituted in direct opposition to the structures and practices of other, more formally constituted groups; it relied on the deployment of 'laughter' (in its widest sense) to articulate its message. In fact, it might be suggested that the construction of the identity of 'the people' and the articulation of its values within the ballads and songs of the labouring poor are particularly ill-suited to discovery within the conventions of empirical history. On further investigation, however, it can be shown that there are ways in which these apparently mutually exclusive processes – empirical and cultural enquiry – can usefully be combined to illuminate the values and mentality of the labouring poor.

iv) i *William Cobbett and Rural Populism*

We already began to build a framework within which we can 'read' the values of populism in the ballads when we looked at 'The New Fashioned Farmer' and 'Gentlemen Farmers'. Certainly, the empirical validity of the historical model articulated in the

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[49] Joyce, pp.227-9.
[50] Dyck, *William Cobbett*, p.10; Joyce, p.11 (see above, p.44).

ballads would not have been of the first concern to those who sang or bought them. But this does not mean that in its broadest sense it was located outside the boundaries of what was historically true. It has already been suggested that the operation of popular memory in the deployment of rural customs during the particular conditions of the Swing disturbances may have been highly creative. But nonetheless, such customary precedents did exist in the cultural experience of the labouring poor who deployed them; the custom of crying largesse at harvest, of Saints day doleings, of the use of 'dew beer' to consolidate the financial bargain between master and men, and the employment of an intermediary or spokesman, such as the 'Harvest Lord'. The value system that constituted populism can be located within the rhetorical form of the ballads and songs; it is coherent, and in its 'historical sense' it does indeed interpret many of the experienced realities of the rural labouring poor, both in the past and in the present. What is more, ballads and songs are not alone in the articulation of many of these values; there is much within its 'historical sense', its own rhetorically constructed model of the past and the present, that is shared by individuals who were not themselves part of the labouring poor. The loudest and in many ways the most obvious of these voices was that of William Cobbett, the self-appointed spokesman for rural labourers, his 'chopsticks'. Ian Dyck has demonstrated, in his excellent *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, just how close Cobbett's rhetorical voice was to that of the ballads and songs of rural labourers. "It was rural popular culture," he suggests, "that nurtured Cobbett's idiom, directed his reform programme and made of him a cultural as well as a political commentator".[51] Dyck's work certainly seems to confirm this claim in terms of Cobbett's role as a *cultural* commentator for the rural labourers; the degree to which Cobbett's politics should also be so closely identified with the 'chopsticks' he spoke so eloquently to, and so forcefully for, is, perhaps, more open to question.

In his book, Dyck presents a highly plausible model of Cobbett's political progress from anti-Jacobin to celebrated Radical over the period of three or four decades. He shows how Cobbett's encounters with the political establishment no less than his communion with rural workers formed a consciousness that, though not without its complexities, was in practice entirely coherent. Cobbett was, he argues, quite consistent in his political and cultural commentary despite the fact that he held simultaneous membership of the country platform, the reform club, and the select group of Radical

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[51] Dyck, *William Cobbett*, p.3.

MPs who spoke for the newly urbanised constituencies of the north. Dyck also shows convincingly just how close on rural matters Cobbett's cultural voice was to the labourers' own. Where he is less convincing, though, is in his conflation of Cobbett's cultural and political 'voices', and the intellectual leap he then makes of identifying the labourers' political consciousness with that of Cobbett's. In so doing he ascribes to the labourers, as he does to Cobbett himself, the growth, during the contentious years between the beginning of the century and the 1820s, of an increasingly 'sophisticated' class consciousness:

> In 1800 the labourers' dominant ideology was a recognition of their importance as producers. They articulated this ideology, not as a class, but as countrymen who joined farmers and landlords in expressing antagonism towards the culture and economic appropriations of the towns. As the labourers' songs show, this common discourse broke down during the Regency years...They viewed their own class consciousness as a negative and hopefully temporary construction, but it was class consciousness all the same.[52]

I would suggest that when we look again at the evidence, this is an unwonted and in many ways unfortunate intellectual leap to make. Dyck makes great use of rural ballads and songs to demonstrate his thesis, including 'The New-Fashioned Farmer'; in fact, they make up by far the most substantial part of the evidence he presents to illustrate the identity between Cobbett's political consciousness and that of rural labourers. His efforts are mostly directed towards showing that the ballads and songs of the labouring poor followed Cobbett's own political trajectory, changing significantly in tenor between the beginning of the century and the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. He suggests that before a period roughly beginning at the end of the French wars, rural songs most commonly made use of "traditional symbols [which] spoke to the same federation of countrymen, through the symbol of the 'plough' or the 'ploughman'". For example, in the case of 'The Husbandman and Servingman', a seventeenth-century ballad that remained popular until the end of the nineteenth century, he suggests that "no distinction is made between the labourer and working farmer, regardless of their relationship to economic production". However, by the end of the French Wars, and particularly by the 1820s, Dyck identifies this "federation of countrymen" as being under serious threat, first from the withdrawal of farmers grown fat from the profits of war, and then, crucially, by labourers who came to recognise the necessity of the development of their own class consciousness to counter that of the 'new fashioned' farmers. This, he suggests, is reflected in the ballads and songs of the 1820s and 1830s – songs such as 'The New-Fashioned Farmer' – in which "the words 'husbandman' and 'countryman' gave way to

'labourer' and 'farmer'".[53]

The first point to make is that it is highly misleading to imply that ballads which spoke of 'farmers' and 'labourers', as opposed to 'countrymen' or 'husbandman', only appeared after the economically contentious period of the French wars. The ballad 'Gentlemen Farmers', for example – a song which exhibits as strongly as any other what Dyck identifies as the 'class consciousness' of the protest song – was written in 1783, and the version above was published somewhere between 1797 and 1807. This alone may not be enough to provide a serious challenge to Dyck's analysis; it might simply point to the fact that this fundamental shift from 'countryman' consciousness to class consciousness happened earlier than he allows. But, as he himself admits of 'The Husbandman and Servingman', it is also true that many of the rural ballads of the seventeenth and eighteenth century retained at least as much currency with the labouring poor as what he calls the "protest songs" of the 1820s and 1830s which dealt with 'labourers' and 'farmers'. Ballads which relied for their rhetoric and symbolism on the "federation of countrymen" remained a crucial part of the repertoire songs bought and sung by labourers throughout the nineteenth century, and nowhere is there any sense in which they were superseded by the newer ballads either in the song culture of the labouring poor or in their consciousness. Certainly, a shift did occur in the tenor of the ballads which were being *written* from the beginning of the century, but given the continued popularity of 'older' rural ballads such as 'The Husbandman and Servingman' the implied shift from some kind of vertical 'countryman consciousness' towards the horizontal consciousness of class is considerably harder to sustain.

Crucial to a class conscious analysis of social and production relations is, of course, the identification of conflicting political agendas. If we can locate such an identification in the songs and ballads of the rural labouring poor, then perhaps we may go some way towards vindicating Dyck's claims for their consciousness. Certainly, the message of songs such as 'Gentlemen Farmers' and 'The New Fashioned Farmer' was redolent of the rift which appeared between certain sections of the rural community. They point forcefully to many of the areas of conflict between large farmers and labourers which William Cobbett himself described in some of his most powerful prose. "I *shall* see the scarlet hunting-coats stripped from the backs of the farmers," he raged, echoing the ballads: "I *shall* see the polished boots pulled from their legs: and I *shall* see the forte-

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[52] Dyck, *William Cobbett*, p.73-4.
[53] 'The Husbandman and Servingman', see Appendix; Dyck, *William Cobbett*, pp.52-3, 61, 57.

pianos [*sic*] kicked out of their houses." But, unlike the ballads which identified 'pride' or the Devil as the cause of the farmers' inflated social ambitions, Cobbett asked the question:

> Do I *blame* the farmers, then, for these things? Do I blame *them* for their being sublimated to this unnatural height? No; no more than I blame the thistles for filling the land with their seeds and spoiling the crops. It is the fault of the husbandman that the thistles do this; and it is the fault of the government, that is to say of the Parliament, that the farmers have grown rank, and have stifled the wholesome part of the agricultural community.[54]

Of course, it is disingenuous to suggest that Cobbett *never* pointed to the 'pride' of the farmers; there are many passages in the *Register* and elsewhere where he does just that. It is important to note, though, that unlike the labourers who bought the ballads, Cobbett always had an eye to the wider political context of society's ills, even country society. This is a clear example of the point at which Cobbett's consciousness departed from that of the labourers he spoke to and spoke for. For nowhere in the rural songs, not even in the rural protest ballads of the 1820s and 1830s, is this political connection made directly or indirectly. As we have already seen, along with Alun Howkins, Ian Dyck implicitly acknowledges this when he suggests that for modern historians these ballads are seen as "inarticulate on politics if eloquent on problems".[55] One reason for this, I would suggest, is that for labourers to have traced the roots of farmers' lofty ambitions to Parliament and the mundane world of politics would have been to deny the 'transcendent' moral code of populism, with its 'legitimate' hierarchy which was identified above, and therefore ultimately to have weakened its appeal. According to 'Gentlemen Farmers', it was the Devil himself who had led the farmers to break the implicit code of populism; and in the later ballads, where the Devil is absent, then his cipher, "stinking pride", has led them to it.

Even more crucial for the growth and development of class consciousness is, of course, the recognition of conflicting economic and social interests. Again, Dyck suggests that between around 1810 and 1830,

> along with the labourers Cobbett was edging from a vertical to a horizontal perspective of rural society; in other words exchanging his countryman consciousness for class consciousness. In the same manner as the labourers' songs he illustrates this new consciousness by remarking on the tendency of employers to withdraw from labour and to honour the plough independently of the plough*man*.[56]

Clearly he is right to point to this latter tendency both in the songs and within Cobbett's own rhetoric. From the end of the French Wars Cobbett dedicated countless column

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[54] *Political Register*, 11th March 1821, p757.
[55] Dyck and Howkins, p.21 (see above p.52).
[56] Dyck, *William Cobbett*, p.56.

inches in the *Register* to the withdrawal of 'new fashioned' farmers from the spade and the plough. In 1816 he printed approvingly a fanciful tale from "a spirit of the other world", wherein a "little country farmer, living not far from the estate of a rich *Commoner*", looks down sadly on the fate of his sons and his grandsons who, spoilt by the attentions of the local Squire, are ruined by luxury and pride. The "Spirit of A FARMER IN OLD TIMES", as well as ridiculing at length the new and opulent habits of the young farmers, makes great play of contrasting his own working life, during which "I managed by my own industry to bring up my wife and family tolerably well", with that of his grandsons:

> How ridiculous! how truly laughable, instead of being on foot by break of day attending to the stock, here we find the master of the farm breakfasting at eleven o'clock in his *study*, reading a novel, in order to get a sufficient stock of nonsense to vend at the next ball or card party.

The similarities between this cautionary tale and 'The New Fashioned Farmer' are striking. Here, just as in the songs and ballads of the labouring poor, the 'new fashioned' farmers are undone by their own avarice and pride. Written in 1816, and following the artificially inflated prices of wheat during the French wars, the author clearly foresaw a crash and viewed it more than a little approvingly:

> I understand from a very intelligent Spirit I ferryed over the Styx the other day, this career had received a sudden check: the commodity they dealt in declined very much in price. All is havoc and confusion: the good old building which I have often looked at with purchasing my stock on Saturday is, I am told, almost crammed to suffocation with credulous and unthinking tenants: curricles, tandems, gigs, dog-carts, shooting ponies, all, all! are borne down by the sweeping torrent of insolvency.[57]

Elsewhere, Cobbett himself saved much of his most passionate invective for those farmers who elevated themselves beyond the 'natural' role of the agriculturalist, as a follower of the plough. His piece "On the Blessings of Agricultural Distress" also addresses the issue of wheat prices, but this time in 1821 when the 'spirit' of the old-fashioned farmer had to an extent been proved right.

> But, you will say, is the present race of farmers to be *ruined*. Yes, if necessary to the general good. Besides, what is *ruin*? Is it ruin for men, who always ought to have *laboured*, to be brought to labour? Is it ruin to leave off wearing the shining boot? Is it ruin to put on a smock frock? The *big big* ones are fund-holders or money-lenders (and sometimes to their 'lords of the soil'), and, therefore, they are safe. They will get rid of their farms, and live on their means...Those who remain farmers must have their *rents lowered*, until they can make both ends meet. They must themselves put their hand to the plough now-and-then, and not think of a ride around the farm.[58]

Passages such as this abound in his writing, but, as Ian Dyck notes, "it was rural popular

[57] *Political Register*, 20th January 1816, pp.85-8.
[58] *Political Register*, 7th April 1821, p.17.

culture that nurtured Cobbett's idiom"[59] and, in just the same way as the ballads, some of the most powerful expressions of his rural 'labour theory' take the form of an appeal to popular memory. Time and again he contrasts the behaviour of contemporary farmers with that of the farmers of his youth:

> The farmer being taken from his cavalry horse, having again put on the smock-frock, and having, along with his wife, taken seat at table with his plowman and his maids, his son will now-and-then, marry a servant maid, and the carter will sometimes marry the farmer's daughter.

The question is, though, is this really the expression of a burgeoning class consciousness? Certainly, as Dyck suggests, Cobbett was aware of the withdrawal of farmers from the plough and, like the ballads and songs, he had no hesitation in lambasting at every turn the loftiness, greed and opulence of the 'new fashioned' farmer. But it is instructive to note that he concluded this piece with the prediction that "[t]hus will come back that community of interests and feelings which the infernal Pitt system of Paper-money has driven away".[60] In reality, it was the farmers who were accused by Cobbett of acquiring the consciousness of class, and one that excluded all possibility of a return to that "community of interests" in rural affairs. It is the farmers that Cobbett, taking his lead from songs such as 'The New Fashioned Farmer', accused of breaking the social compact and of transcending the legitimate hierarchy of populism. His own solution was not a 'class' solution at all. In fact he actively rejected any such solution, as Dyck himself implicitly acknowledges:

> Life on the land, [Cobbett] argued, produced economic co-operation and a sort of natural democracy among all countrymen, regardless of their proximity to the means of production...Conflict, class distinctions and market capitalism stood in sharp contrast to this rural vision. Agriculture was a natural pursuit, and the pursuit most natural to the English. Therefore it was nonsense, in his opinion, to speak of the landed interest or the 'agricultural class'.[61]

For William Cobbett to have accepted a class-based analysis of social relations at the beginning of the nineteenth century would have meant him abandoning one of populism's most fundamental tenets; that the ruinous state of rural social relations was temporary, and that the legitimate hierarchy could and would be reinstated. It would have meant denying what Joyce has called the 'demotic utopianism' of the populism articulated in the ballads and songs of the rural poor, a utopianism that was founded on the belief that desired social conditions could be brought into being (or, according to the rhetorical code of popular culture, brought *back* into being). In other words, it would

[59] See above, p.66.
[60] *Political Register,* 5th May 1821, pp.341-2.
[61] Dyck, *William Cobbett*, pp.47-8.

have meant denying that aberrant masters, 'new fashioned' farmers, could be persuaded either by reason, by example or by force of numbers to return within the ranks of the people and to treat their workers as they should be treated according to populism's transcendent moral code. This is not to suggest that Cobbett or indeed the labourers themselves were naïve enough to expect a Damascene conversion on the part of profiteering and engrossing farmers, that they believed farmers would simply see the error of their ways, break up their farms and return to the smock-frock and the plough. Rather, it is to suggest that, unlike the retrospective class-based analysis of social relations articulated by historians, the populist code dictated that however such a change was brought about – whether by persuasion or by force – large farmers *could in reality* be brought back within the ranks of 'the people'. In other words, it was the belief that there was no intrinsic barrier to this change occurring, no historical inevitability in the process of engrossment, and no necessary or inevitable conflict of interests between farmers and their labourers.

We have already seen how Cobbett insisted that "I *shall* see the scarlet hunting-coats stripped from the backs of the farmers. I *shall* see the polished boots pulled from their legs: and I *shall* see the forte-pianos kicked out of their houses".[62] Most often, though, he called for an end to the engrossment of farms and to the decline of small farmers. In 1821, he was still equivocal on the issue:

> I am not quite clear in my opinion as to which is best for the nation: a reduction of the interest of the [war] Debt, or the total ruin of the *present* farmers and landlords. *One of the two* must take place: and, I am by no means sure, that the latter may not, in the *end*, be the best.

But he was far from equivocal in his opinion that "I hold a return to *small farms* to be *absolutely necessary* for a restoration to anything like an English community"; and he was also convinced that such a return *would take place*:

> Farms will be divided again. This is the natural, the inevitable process. The small farms were put down by discounting and speculation; and out of the destruction of these they will revive.[63]

On the eve of the Swing risings in 1829, however, Cobbett had lost all of his equivocation and much of his residual optimism. He declaimed vehemently that "[t]here is now no *common interest*, no *common feeling*, between the farmer and the labourers", and he continued to maintain that this was the result of engrossment and the swallowing up of

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[62] See above, p.69.
[63] *Political Register*, 11th March 1821, p.749.

small farms:

> those who were the *large farmers* under the old and good state of things, found, in the fiction of paper-money, the easy means of *borrowing*...[T]hey had the means at their will; and they swallowed small farmer after small farmer, till the whole were annihilated.

In his analysis of the state of agricultural society in 1829, he did accept that society in the countryside was at that moment divided along class lines: "Now the agricultural population is divided into three distinct classes; Landowners. Great Farmers. Land-slaves, called paupers". This is very different, though, from suggesting that even in the turbulent world of late-1820s agricultural relations he accepted such class divisions as inevitable. In his rhetoric at least, he still believed that such a situation was impossible to sustain, that agricultural depression would inevitably lead to a return of the natural hierarchy:

> as [large farmers] become poor now, they will become humane; as they drop off their fine horses, they will become more familiar with their slaves, called paupers; they will feel themselves more near to them; they will see that the distinction is not so great[64].

His position, though hardening, had not fundamentally changed in the intervening years. As a commentator he accepted the reality of divisions in rural society along class lines; but as a populist he still believed this to be a temporary situation, one that could not be sustained in the 'natural' order of things, and one that would be swept away as the 'natural' order was re-established. His means of bringing this about was, as we have seen, not one that found favour in the songs and ballads, the rhetoric of the labouring poor themselves: though a populist, Cobbett was also a committed parliamentarian and a thoroughly political animal. For Cobbett, it was the "fiction of paper-money" and other inflationary measures that had brought about the engrossment of small farms, and it was only by putting an end to the 'paper-money system' and other legislative measures – which, he believed, could only be achieved through a reform of Parliament – that the tyranny would be brought to an end. But though his parliamentarianism found no parallel in the ballads and songs of the labourers, his analysis of the state of rural relations certainly did. And he was not alone among contemporary commentators in echoing this popular analysis.

iv) ii <u>*Populism and the Wider Consensus*</u>

The populism that found voice in the ballads and songs of the rural labouring poor and in Cobbett's *Political Register* was echoed, in part or in full, in many of the pamphlets and

tracts that added to the widespread debate surrounding agricultural distress and the problem of social relations after the French Wars. Even those commentators who would not perhaps have been expected to be the labourers' closest allies understood that the worsening behaviour of farmers had been central to the declining condition of their workers. In a pamphlet entitled *The Cottage Land Worker* which advocated the allotment of land to labourers (something which will be explored in detail in the final chapter) its anonymous author traced much of the destitution of labourers to cases "where the farmer reduces the wages of the labourer of the field, through avarice or alleged necessity". This was a view echoed by "A Land-owner", who, in the period following Swing, believed that *The Causes of the Distress of the Agricultural Population* could be traced directly to the withdrawal of domestic comforts for labourers and the forcing down of their wages by greedy farmers:

> I shall endeavour to shew [the origins of such distress] both by comparing the prices paid for the work and the advantages enjoyed by the rural population in the districts where there is no complaint, and, by pointing out the benefits which the labourer derives, by having it in his own power to make use of his spare time in cultivating his garden, rooting his own fuel, baking his own bread, and feeding his own pork and poultry; advantages which the labourers in the distressed counties are not permitted to enjoy. These privileges have generally been withheld by the farmers, from selfish motives, and, although they pretend that they give higher wages to the labourers as an equivalent, yet the increased rate of wages is not a sufficient equivalent.

The Wiltshire clergyman and political economist, G Poulett Scrope, was even more direct in his condemnation of the behaviour of large farmers towards their labourers. His pamphlet was written at the height of the Swing disturbances in the central southern counties of England, and in it he stated bluntly:

> GENTLEMEN, THE riotous proceedings of the agricultural peasantry in so many of your counties is effecting a radical cure, though in a rather rough manner, of the disease under which we have all been some time suffering. That the labourers have received far too little from you for some years past, whether in the shape of wages, of pauper allowances, or of both together through the hocus pocus way you have of mixing them up, is what I have long thought, and what all seem to be now convinced of. That you *cannot* any longer continue to keep them of such short commons, is now very certain. Wages and parish allowances *must* be immediately raised; and most of you have done this, or promised to do it already.[65]

Of course, there is only the smallest continuity between the analysis of these commentators and that of populism as we have so far described it. Poulett Scrope and 'Anon' suggest that the condition of the labourers can be traced solely to the niggardly wages paid by farmers; the 'land-owner's' view is more expansive, tracing their distress

[64] *Political Register*, 14th November 1829, pp.615-6, 618.

[65] Anon, *The Cottage Land Worker* (Bath 1830), pp.4-5; A Land-owner, *The Causes of the Distress of the Agricultural Population Considered and Demonstrated* (London 1831), p.3; G Poulett Scrope, *The Common Cause of the Landlord, Tenant, and Labourer, and the Common Cure of Their Complaint in a*

to the withdrawal of certain domestic perquisites by farmers, as well as to low wages. Each of them does, however, subscribe to the highly populist view that the greed and avarice of the 'new fashioned' farmer is at the root of the problem. In fact, among the pamphlets and tracts that constitute a substantial part of the debate surrounding agricultural distress at the beginning of the nineteenth century it is possible to find parallels existing among the structurally superior with the populism articulated in the ballads and songs of popular culture, even though its expression here is, necessarily perhaps, somewhat fragmented and diffuse. Indeed, these parallels are found even at the heart of the official sources. Looking again at the example of the Swing disturbances, we noted in Chapter 1 that in areas where they were widespread, many farmers seemed happy to collude with the crowds in their calls for higher wages. In fact, one of the most consistent themes in the official rhetoric which accompanied and surrounded the disturbances was the extent to which the authorities in Whitehall felt the need to remind local magistrates and farmers of their duty *not* to give in to the crowds' demands.

Shortly after taking office, the new Whig Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne, sent a stiffly worded circular to all magistrates in the disturbed regions noting that

> it has been observed, with great Regret, that the Justices of the Peace and others have in many Instances, under the influence of Threats and Intimidation, and the Apprehension of Violence and Outrage, advised the establishment of an uniform Rate of Wages to be paid for Labour in the respective Neighbourhoods, and have also, from the same Motives, in many Instances recommended the Discontinuance of the Employment of Machines used for thrashing out Corn and for other Purposes.

He also felt it necessary to point out that

> The Justices of the Peace must be aware, that they are invested with no legal Authority to settle the Amount of the Wages of Labour...[and] upon the second point it is only necessary to observe, that these Machines are as much entitled to the Protection of the Law as any other Description of Property.[66]

The evidence shows that the Home Secretary's fears were far from misplaced: more often than not, when approached by a crowd demanding an increase in wages or the dismantling of a threshing machine, farmers and magistrates did in fact capitulate. In Stockbridge, Hampshire, a handbill dating from December 1830 was posted stating that

> At a numerous and respectable meeting of the Occupiers of Land...It was Resolved, that as it is very desirable to arrange and settle the Wages of Agricultural Servants, the following Scale be adopted...

At Devizes, Wiltshire, another handbill appeared on the 29th November by order of the

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Letter to the Agriculturalists of the South of England (Castle Combe, Wiltshire 1830) p.5.
[66] H(ampshire) R(ecord) O(ffice) 10M57/03, Lord Melbourne, 'Circular to Magistrates', 8th December 1830.

Magistrates, who

> Observing now with great satisfaction that most Parishes in this Neighbourhood have Preserved a loyal and peaceable behaviour; and that in others good order has been established; they hereby strongly RECOMMEND to all Landowners and Occupiers of Lands in this Division, to ADVANCE forthwith the AMOUNT of WAGES to their LABOURERS: so that every able-bodied Labourer shall receive for his full Labour, Wages, at the Rate of Ten Shillings weekly.[67]

The wording of these handbills suggests that something more than mere capitulation was in operation here. The magistrates at Devizes appear to have waited until after the disturbances died down to issue their unlawful recommendation; similarly, the Stockbridge handbill was posted in response to a "numerous and respectable meeting of the Occupiers of Land" which took place on the 8th of December, a full fortnight after peace was restored to the area with the arrival of a troop of the 9th Lancers.[68] In another example, this time from Norfolk, the tone is still more supportive of the labourers' cause;

> The Magistrates in the hundreds of Tunstead and Happing, in the County of Norfolk...wish to make it publicly known, that it is their opinion that such disturbances principally arise from the use of Threshing Machines, and to the insufficient Wages of the Labourers...The magistrates are determined to enforce the Laws against all tumultuous Rioters and Incendiaries, and they look for support to all the respectable and well disposed part of the Community; at the same time they feel a full Conviction, that no severe measures will be necessary, if the proprietors of Land will give proper employment to the Poor on their own occupations, and encourage their Tenants to do the same.[69]

There is little in the tone of this handbill to suggest that the magistrates have been browbeaten by intimidation or by the actions of the crowds. Rather, they openly state their determination to "enforce the law against all tumultuous Rioters and Incendiaries", encouraging local occupiers to enlist as Special Constables in order to assist in this intention. But still, they express the opinion that "no severe measures will be necessary" if employment is found for the labourers at a reasonable rate of wages.

Of course, the atmosphere in the countryside in the weeks and months following the Swing disturbances would have remained fragile, and the fears of landowners, occupiers and magistrates would undoubtedly have remained high. But elsewhere it is possible to find further confirmation that many of the structurally superior in the countryside were more than a little sympathetic to the plight of agricultural labourers, and to their demands. Even after a period of up to two years' reflection, this sympathy is clearly evident in many of the responses to Question 5 of the 'Rural Queries' in the 1834 Report on the Poor Laws.[70] The overseer of Chatteris on the Isle of Ely, for example, responded that the

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[67] HRO 92M95/F2/12/3, handbill (n.d.); HRO 92M95/F2/12/4, handbill dated 29th November 1830.
[68] Hobsbawm and Rudé, p.119.
[69] P(ublic) R(ecord) O(ffice), HO52/9/18, handbill dated 24th November 1830.
[70] 'Can you give the Commissioners any information respecting the causes and consequences of the Agricultural Riots and Burnings of 1830 and 1831?'

"Riots and Burnings in our agricultural districts were caused, in a great measure, for want of certain regulations on machinery". Joseph Marriage of Chelmsford put it down to

> [t]he great privations of the agricultural labourers, primarily arising from the inadequate accommodation of the modern cottages, their alienation from the soil, and the abstraction of small farms...[which have] very much tended to lessen and almost destroy the respect and honour which the peasantry had long entertained for their superiors in life.

The Surgeon and Vestry Clerk of Rochford, Essex, felt that a combination of these factors was influential:

> The use of thrashing-machines threw many Labourers out of employment at that period of the year when they used to be employed in the barns instead of the fields. Low and insufficient wages were also the result of this machinery. They had no garden of their own to cultivate. They were made solely dependent for their subsistence on their daily labour, or the Poor Rates. The waste and poor grounds were entirely monopolised. Land had become so valuable that even the Commons were taken from the poor, and inclosed. Thus they became entirely destitute.

It is clear that many local parish officials felt a high degree of sympathy for the actions of the labourers during the period of Swing, and on occasion this sympathy tipped over into, if not explicit support for, then at least a tacit understanding of the labourers' actions. "If you know of Parishes where there are 10, 15, 20 to 40, and more, able and willing men, without a day's work in a month, many of them with large families starving, what are you to expect?" asked Edward Moore, JP, of Great Bealings in Suffolk; and his stark assessment was echoed by the Assistant Overseer of Burton upon Stather, Lincolnshire:

> The labourer who finds himself and family starving when surrounded by corn stacks, &c. which he has perhaps laboured hard to produce, and of which he cannot obtain a portion sufficient to satisfy his cravings of hunger, thinks himself an injured man and an outcast of society. He becomes careless of the consequences, and stimulated by revenge endeavours to reduce the man whom he fancies to be his greatest enemy to the same level with himself, by destroying his property.[71]

Clearly, none of these statements of understanding offers anything approaching a vindication of the actions of the Swing crowds, something which could hardly be expected in the replies of parish officials to a statutory body in Whitehall. But taken alongside the pamphlets and tracts of sympathetic commentators and the actions of many magistrates and occupiers during the period of Swing, they do hint at the way in which many of the structurally superior in the countryside shared the concerns of the labourers who made up those crowds.

Of course, pointing to the bran-tub of causes and solutions offered by pamphleteers and others for the actions of the Swing crowds is clearly not sufficient evidence in itself to suggest that they shared anything like the populist world-view of the

[71] *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, 1834, Appendix B(1), 'Answers to Rural Queries in Five Parts'; Part V, pp.51, 170, 184, 290, 448.

labourers. But taken as a whole, the mix of concerns and theories, and the applied reasoning of many of those in positions of authority in the countryside, does seem to point with a remarkable degree of force towards the model of populism presented in the popular culture of the labouring poor. The indiscriminate use of threshing machines, which at the very least exacerbated seasonal unemployment; the engrossment of land and the usurpation of small farms; the enclosure of commons and wastes, which may have afforded some respite for the underpaid and underemployed agricultural labourer; the denial of small favours to labourers, such as access to land sufficient to raise a pig and root his own fuel; the systematic downward pressure on wages; and the misapplication of the Poor Laws to sustain that downward pressure – all of these are to be found in these comments, replies and treatise, and all point to a single cause: the greed and avarice of the 'new fashioned' farmer, and his withdrawal from the agricultural community; his withdrawal (in the words of the Revd. Poulett Scrope) from the 'common cause of the landlord, tenant, and labourer'. Earlier, we noted Joyce's use of the concept of 'demotic utopianism' to describe the way in which the songs and ballads of the labouring poor functioned as a way of exploring alternative social realities within the context of a wider process of social negotiation. However, the use of the word 'utopian' to describe this process could be seen here as a little misleading, for it tends to disguise the extent to which these 'alternative social realities' already existed, at least in the context of local social relations. We can see in the pamphlets and tracts of contemporary commentators, and in the replies of local parish officials and others to the 1834 Inquiry, how sympathetic many of the structurally superior in the countryside were to the fundamental point of many of the rural 'protest' ballads (or 'ballads of complaint'), that it was the greed and avarice, the 'pride' of the 'new fashioned' farmers which had brought about much of the suffering of the labouring population. Elsewhere, and not least among the official sources, it becomes clear that those same commentators and parish officials, landowners and even many of the farmers themselves shared a great deal of the value system that made up the populism of the rural labouring poor.

In the rural 'protest' ballads, farmers' 'pride' is clearly identified as the source of the labourers' ills; it has led to the breaking of the social compact and the elevation of farmers beyond their 'legitimate' social role. One of the most consistent illustrations of this pride is the changing nature of the board offered by farmers to their servants, which is often employed as a motif for the altered relationship *per se* between masters and servants. In an well-known illustration of this 'The Old Hat', a highly popular ballad that

was reprinted many times throughout the nineteenth century under different titles, complains that

> The master at the board-head sat the table for to grace
> The servants as they all came in each took his proper place,
> And the dame with chearful heart gave to each man his due,
> Such plenty, ah! did then abound when this old hat was new.
>
> But now the times are alter'd, and pinching to the poor
> They now receive their wages quite coldly at the door,
> Into their house we do not come, tho' we be e'er so few,
> It was not so when Bess did reign or this old hat was new.[72]

Again, it is important to note that the empirical validity of this historical claim is of far less importance to the function of the ballad than the perception that a historical precedent existed; but still, there is no doubt that it was founded to some degree on the truth. John Hancock, himself a large farmer of 500-600 acres at Hulse in Somerset, when asked by the 1833 Select Committee on Agriculture, "Do the farmers' servants dine at the same table with the farmer?" replied, "No, they do not, generally speaking, except it is among a small farmer of 50 to 60 acres; he is like a servant himself". It was, he pointed out, related to the diminishing custom of boarding servants in the house, the passing of which he himself heartily approved of:

> In your district has that practice much diminished?- Yes, it has diminished within these 20 years, I think...
> You think the change is beneficial?- Yes, to the master and mistress and all; it is not pleasant having so many female servants and young men about.

By his testimony, Farmer Hancock firmly placed himself in the camp of the modernists, the 'new fashioned' farmers. Others among the structurally superior were less inclined to welcome such changes. Thomas Law Hodges, MP for the Weald in Kent, was one such: in evidence to the 1831 House of Lords' Select Committee on the State of the Poor Laws he stated his opinion that

> the farmer, in consequence of the alteration of his circumstances, and the high prices which prevailed during the [French] war, got above his situation, and was ready to part with all his men, whom he considered rather encumbrances and annoyances to him...they were all desirous of being disencumbered from their farm servants, and they lived more expensively.

Richard Mackenzie Bacon put the case even more strongly:

> I was asked generally as to the moral degradation of the agricultural classes, whether it had proceeded from certain circumstances? To what I before stated I wish to add that a great deal has arisen from the separation of the farmers from their servants; to avoid settlements, farmers have been very reluctant to admit their agricultural servants into their houses: this has produced a complete separation between the farmer and his man...When I was a boy I used to visit in a large farmhouse, where the farmer sat in a room with a door opening to the servants hall, and everything was carried from the one table to another. Now they will rarely permit a man to live in their houses; and it is in consequence a total bargain and a

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[72] 'The Old Hat', see Appendix.

> sale for money, and all idea of affection is destroyed.[73]

'The Old Hat' goes on to complain that, far from sharing board at the farmer's table, agricultural labourers now "receive their wages quite coldly at the door". This too was founded on the experience of many labourers, and it was of great concern to those who shared their view of 'legitimate' social relations in the countryside. William Cobbett, for example, complained in 1828 that

> [i]t came out in *evidence* in a court of justice, the other day, that a farmer was in the habit of paying his labourers out of [the] window, in order to prevent them from setting *foot within his house*. Vengeance must, in some shape or other, fall upon such men, first or last: the state of things is so unnatural, that it cannot remain long.[74]

The question of farm servants living-in or living-out is one that exercised many contemporaries, and it is one that has also exercised many historians subsequently. Keith Snell, for example, shows how agricultural labourers had sound economic reasons for disliking the drift away from farm service in favour of farm labour. He ably demonstrates how the decline of living-in was one part in the overall picture of the immiseration of agricultural labourers between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries:

> Service had provided savings and security for young people, allowing a late marriage age, and its regional persistence in 1851 was strongly correlated with relatively high proportions of unmarried males and females over the age of twenty...The partial independence allowed to the labouring poor by commons and wastes was also a motive to hire servants, so as to ensure supply of labour throughout the year; supply which was all the more essential in forms of pastoral agriculture often associated with smaller farms.

Ian Dyck, on the other hand, suggests that labourers were less likely to be troubled by the practical decline of boarding in-servants, maintaining that "social control was implicit in the tradition of living-in". For him, the live issue is one of rights and privileges: "the labourers looked upon it as a right to accept or decline for themselves". For Dyck, the decline in boarding farm servants was yet another example of the growing and irrevocable rift between farmers and labourers, and was one of the most potent symbols in the growth of a class consciousness among *both*:

> Farmer and Labourer, needless to say, had long been distinguishable at the point of access to the produce of the land, but class consciousness had hitherto been postponed by shared board, common toil and a spirit of countryman unity.[75]

Leaving aside the issue raised by Keith Snell – that there were sound economic reasons for labourers to have resented the decline of living-in – there is another perspective which can be offered for the potency of this particular alteration in social relations among agricultural labourers. We have already seen how 'The Old Hat' conflates the two issues

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[73] *Report from the Select Committee on Agriculture* 1833, p.440; *Report from the House of Lords Select Committee on the State of the Poor Laws* 1831, pp.24, 139.
[74] *Political Register*, 26th April 1828, p.539.

of a decline in board offered at the farmer's table and the handing over of wages at the front door. In one sense, this is yet another clear and unequivocal illustration within the popular culture of the labouring poor of the rampaging 'pride' of 'new fashioned farmers'. In another, however, it is also a practical example of the way in which the withdrawal of farmers from the agricultural community, their denial of the 'common cause of landlord, tenant and labourer', had a direct and damaging effect on the operation of populism.

Many contemporaries complained that the decline of living-in was central to the disappearance of 'affection' or 'common cause' between labourers and farmers. John Ellman from Glynde in Sussex suggested that farmers' wives were no longer adequate to boarding their servants: "I am sorry to say...they think it a great trouble to have two or three servants in the house to attend to, which their grandmothers did not". In the same piece of evidence he also voiced his opinion that "I think there is not that harmony and good will kept up which formerly there used to be between [labourers and their employers]". Arthur Octavious Baker of Easton, near Winchester, wrote that

> I cannot help feeling the strongest wish to see generally restored that excellent old fashioned custom amongst farmers, of lodging and boarding their men within their own house,

and this was a sentiment that was echoed by an anonymous counterpart:

> the great cause, if not the sole cause, of this deplorable state of the agricultural districts, is to be attributed to the system of the Farmers discontinuing to board and lodge their men in their houses.

This writer even went on to suggested that the practice should be positively encouraged by statutory financial reward:

> The plan is simply this – That not only, instead of reducing rents, but in all cases, where the Farmer would accept it, to give a yearly premium, or bonus, for each hired labourer, man and boy, he would board and lodge in his house.[76]

For these witnesses, the decline of in-service was at the very heart of the breakdown in social relations. It was central to the loss of 'feeling' and 'affection' which characterised those relations in the populist model of the past. For the labourers themselves, however, it was not the decline of service that was to blame for the loss of 'affection' or good feeling between farmers and labourers. Certainly, songs – and even 'protest' songs – do

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[75] Keith Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor* (Cambridge 1985), pp.215-6; Dyck, *William Cobbett*, p.64.
[76] *Report of the Select Committee on Criminal Commitments and Convictions* 1828, pp.36, 32; Arthur Octavious Baker, *Considerations on the Present State of the Peasantry of England with Suggestions for the Improvement of their Condition* (Winchester 1830), p.9; Anon, *Suggestions for Improving the Moral Character of the Agricultural Labourer; and for Gradually Restoring them to their Former Habits of Industry, Independence and Contentment; for the Better Security of Rents, and for Effecting a Deduction of Poor Rates* (London 1833), pp.7-9.

exist which treat the subject of farm service, but almost exclusively they take the form of a jocular appeal either for better wages for existing servants, or for prospective servants at statute fairs to drive as hard a bargain as the farmers themselves.[77] The tendency to which Ian Dyck points in the ballads and songs is in fact a lament at the decline, not so much of in-service, but – as 'The Old Hat' illustrates – the decline of face-to-face relations between farmers and labourers symbolised by the provision of board and the sharing of food and drink. This is a concern that recurs time and time again in the 'protest' ballads. In 'What Will Old England Come To', for example, the narrator laments that

> When my grandmother was a young woman, O then what doings were there?
> When servants did eat with their masters and drank the best cider and beer,
> But now they're shov'd in the back kitchen the coarsest provisions to chew,
> And are forced to drink belly vengeance. Oh! what will poor England come to?[78]

Again, in 'Swaggering Farmers' the story is much the same:

> Each morning when at breakfast each master and each dame,
> Along with the servants they would eat and drink the same;
> But now with such good old things they've done them quite away
> Into the parlour they must go with coffee, toast and tea.
>
> At the kitchen Table formerly the farmer would sit,
> And carve for all the servants both pudding and good meat,
> But now all in the dining room so closely they're box'd in,
> If a servant were to peep it would be thought a sin.[79]

In actual fact, the evidence of the ballads clearly challenges the widespread perception that in-service was disappearing in the first third of the nineteenth century: implicit in these examples is the assumption that service was still central to the experience of many agricultural labourers. Indeed, despite the many instances where the decline of in-service is lamented (among contemporary pamphleteers and witnesses to parliamentary enquiries, as well as among subsequent historians) there is some evidence that, as Keith Snell suggests, it persisted as strongly as ever in some regions as late as the mid-nineteenth century.[80] In 1821, a witness to the Select Committee on Petitions Complaining of the Depressed State of Agriculture suggested that, in Kent at least, it was still the majority experience: "Is the general practice to board the farming servants in Kent?- Yes, I believe, it is more than otherwise"; and the Revd. George Wells of Steyning in West Sussex gave voice as late as 1830 to his perception that agricultural distress was actually the cause of an *increase* in hiring in-servants:

> Has there been any difference in the habit of the farmers as to employing Labourers being

[77] See, for example, 'Country Hirings', Manchester Central Reference Library: BR Q 398.8, S.9; and 'A New Song on the Hiring of Servants', Bodleian Library, Oxford: Harding B26(253).
[78] 'What Will Old England Come To?', see Appendix.
[79] 'Swaggering Farmers', see Appendix.
[80] Snell, pp.215-6.

> servants, instead of employing labourers who live in cottages?- I think their distress and the cheapness of provisions have induced them to take more house servants into their employ, rather than the parishioners living in their own houses, for farming servants.[81]

iv) iii *The Withdrawal of the Farmer from the 'Everyday Feast' and the Breaking of the Social Compact*

Whatever the historical reality, then, (and there is little doubt that in-service *was* in overall decline from the end of the eighteenth century), the decline of boarding in-servants was not the issue which most taxed agricultural labourers themselves. Clearly, on the evidence of the ballads they were less concerned with the possible decline of living-in than they were with the withdrawal of the farmer from the common table. This makes sense; as Ian Dyck suggests, whatever the financial benefits for labourers of taking board and lodging at the farmer's house there had always and inevitably been a great deal in the relationship of social control. Most contemporaries who lamented the decline of in-service did so using precisely the language of morality and social control. Charles Osborne of Hayling Island, Hampshire, was just one voice among many:

> What should you say with respect to the moral character of the labourer as comparing the present time with the early time [1787] of which you have been speaking?- I am afraid but little improved; I should think perhaps deteriorated than otherwise, which I attribute to young men living at their own houses instead of being kept in farm-houses; there are not so many young men kept in farm-houses as there used to be...
>
> That was some restraint upon their moral conduct?- Yes, and being obliged to be in at a certain hour, which he is not now.[82]

We can see here an interesting departure on the part of those among the structurally superior who generally supported the populist line from the stand taken by the labourers themselves in the ballads and songs. Even William Cobbett used the language of morality and discipline to argue against the decline of living-in: in the 'old days', he maintained,

> a group of young people [was] bred up under the eye and in the company of those who were so well able to teach them their various duties...Here were early rising, industry, good hours, sobriety, decency of language, cleanliness of person, due obedience, all taught, and that, too, by competent teachers, who had a deep interest in the success of their teaching.[83]

The labourers, however, rejected a direct appeal for the restoration living-in: no matter what the financial benefits, it seems, they knew that life in under the roof of the modern farmer was no bed of roses.

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[81] *Report from the Select Committee on Petitions Complaining of the Depressed State of Agriculture* 1821, p.71; 1831 *Select Committee on the Poor Laws,* p.113.
[82] 1833 *Select Committee on Agriculture,* p.483.
[83] *Political Register*, 7th April 1821, pp.7-8.

> For the farmer and wife snug in bed they may stay
> And sit to their breakfast of eggs and fine tea
> At four in the morning to work we must go
> To reap mow and harrow and to follow the plow
> -----
> Its not like the days in the good olden times
> When the servant and master together did dine
> But that the farmer has riches to mock
> He sends now to London his butter and stock.

As 'A New Song on the Hiring of Servants' suggests, it was not in-service *per se* which the labourers rejected: if it could be got under the conditions of the "good olden times" then it might still be of great benefit to them. But by contrast, under the roof of the 'new fashioned' farmer,

> The poor servant girl without any doubt,
> It is better for them to be slaves in the south.[84]

This, of course, is the crux of the matter: no matter how vehemently contemporaries might argue in principle against the decline of living-in – even those who were broadly sympathetic to the populist world-view – and no matter how they might argue that it was central to the decline of 'harmony' and the social compact between farmers and labourers, the labourers themselves knew from their own experience that under present conditions its reassertion could only add to their misery. They knew better than anyone that farm service under the 'new fashioned' farmer was no better than slavery, and they also knew from experience that it was not the decline of farm service that had caused the farmers to withdraw from the social compact. Rather, as the ballads and songs show it was the pride of 'new fashioned' farmers, and the subsequent alteration in the way that they treated their labourers, that had precipitated this withdrawal. They also knew that reversing the trend away from in-service would do nothing in itself to improve their lot; instead, they would simply be at the mercy of their tyrannical masters 24 hours a day rather than merely during the hours of employment. Instead, they sought to bring farmers back to the common table, symbolically at least, and therefore to bring them back within the social compact.

This accords neatly with the issue of 'feasting' which was central to the protocol of the Swing crowds in Chapter 1. It became clear that through the widespread exaction of foodstuffs and beer the Swing crowds made a 'moveable feast' of the protests, and it was also suggested just how important feasts and festivals were to the 'common cause' which united all sections of the agricultural community.[85] Here, in the withdrawal of the

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[84] 'A New Song on the Hiring of Servants', see Appendix.
[85] See above, pp.32-4.

'new fashioned' farmer from the 'everyday feasts' of breakfast, dinner and supper, and in the appeal of ballads and songs for those farmers to return to the common table, we can see a direct parallel with the actions of the Swing crowds. Unlike many among the structurally superior (even many of those who were broadly sympathetic to the values of populism) the labourers understood that the return of that lost 'affection' between labourer and farmer, the return of the social compact, was contingent upon much more than a simple return to 'lost' (or declining) working practices. They knew that a widespread return to in-service under the 'new fashioned' farmer would not in itself change the relationship between themselves and their masters; indeed, they knew that it could only compound the relationship of master and wage-slave. They also knew that the 'new fashioned' farmer would not be persuaded simply by reason or force of argument to mend his ways and return within the ranks of the social category of 'the people'. Instead, they pointed again and again to the true reason for their misery, the true reason that the social compact had been broken: the 'new fashioned' farmer, through his 'pride', his avarice and his greed, had broken the social compact by withdrawing from any influence which the wider community may choose to exert on him. He had figuratively and literally withdrawn from the common table, across which all countrymen shared not only their board but also certain fundamental values. By refusing to share his beer and his food with his labourers the 'new fashioned' farmer had denied any claim that his labourers may have on him, and this was, of course, of great practical as well as symbolic importance to the labourers themselves. It is a withdrawal that was detailed and reiterated again and again in the songs and ballads of the first third of the nineteenth century, and one which, through the operation of 'demotic utopianism', the songs were in part intended to reverse. If they were unable achieve this through the power of persuasion and by the operation of populist values in popular culture, however, then they would do so by force of numbers as the Swing crowds showed in 1830.

Earlier in this chapter it was suggested that one fundamental difference between the populism of the rural labourers and that of William Cobbett lay in the latter's parliamentarianism. For the man who had initiated the formal recording of parliamentary debate, publishing the precursor to Hansard[86], parliamentary reform and political activism were, reasonably enough, the twin paths towards any desired social reform. For the labourers, however, parliament was rarely if ever perceived as part of the solution to their

[86] William Cobbett, *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates* (London, 1804-12).

problems. As Jeanette Neeson says of commoners and their resistance to enclosure:

> They rarely took their opposition to Parliament, and then only as a last resort. Resistance was intensely, and most successfully, a local matter. This was not due to any restricted peasant world view but rather because commoners saw Parliament itself as part of the problem...Peasants, more than their pamphleteer defenders, knew they mattered very little to the state.[87]

For the agricultural labourers in the first third of the nineteenth century, resistance was also "intensely, and most successfully, a local matter". There is a very real sense in which the broadside ballads and songs of the time mirrored the Swing disturbances of 1830, and in which both when taken together reflect this fact of resistance being essentially a local phenomenon. The songs were, of course, super-regional: ballads like 'The Old Hat' and 'The New Fashioned Farmer' were published in London, Manchester, Birmingham and throughout the south of England. Common sense suggests that they would have been popular among urban as well as rural populations, and that they spoke to workers and labourers in a variety of agricultural and industrial settings and on a variety of levels. This is not to deny, though, that on a more intimate, local level they spoke directly to southern agricultural labourers of their own experiences, that the constituencies we have been most concerned with in the present enquiry derived from the ballads the meanings we have been attributing to them. In this sense, the ballad culture of the labouring poor operated in precisely the same way as the 'movement' of Swing. In Chapter 1 we saw that when taken as a whole the events that made up the Swing disturbances certainly represented a 'movement' of agricultural labourers against changes in economic and social relations in the countryside, but that the specific arenas within which this movement operated were highly localised. In other words, what is being claimed for both the Swing disturbances and the ballad culture of the labouring poor is that they were 'meta-movements', expressing the shared populist values of labourers wherever they touched down, but that these values were played out in an essentially local context.

It is in this sense that we can understand why resistance should be "intensely, and most successfully, a local matter". The labourers knew that locally their voices would at least be heard, and everywhere this was borne out by the responses of the local authorities during the Swing disturbances. Magistrates did recommend an increase in wages and relief, farmers did agree to the crowds' demands, and threshing machines were destroyed; and all of this was achieved without recourse to widespread violence or even to the threat

[87] J Neeson, 'An Eighteenth-Century Peasantry' in J Rule and R Malcolmson (eds.) *Protest and Survival:*

of it. It is, of course, extremely difficult to gauge the triumph of a 'meta-movement' like Swing: it has become clear in the present study that, unlike more coherent national movements (those with a specific social or political programme) its demands were almost infinitely mutable, dependent always on specific local conditions though founded on a coherent set of populist principles. Despite its mutability, however, William Cobbett, in an open letter published in the *Register*, was still fulsome in his praise of the overall material successes of Swing as late as 1832: "I have the pleasure to tell you," he wrote, "that the labourers in the east, and in the south, and in the west, are a great deal better off than they were in the year 1830". He also explicitly acknowledged that these triumphs had been achieved on the labourers' own terms, without recourse to Parliament or to normative political claims: "It is my opinion that the thing will go on (Reform Bill or no Reform Bill) till they again have their due share of the produce of the land".[88] Locally, labourers could still exert the authority of the populist code, even if its exertion took place somewhere on the scale between persuasion and coercion. Indeed, within the context of populism it was vital even when persuasion gave way entirely to coercion that the drama of Swing was played out using the language of harmony and common cause. Clearly, custom dictated that all should be present at the 'feast' of Swing, even when the provisions for that feast were less than willingly given and the invitation was not one that could easily be refused.[89] Even when the action demanded the destruction of a farmer's property, the crowd would as likely as not demand his consent and even, on occasion, payment for the 'work' done. George Thomas, Curate of the village of Inkpen, Berkshire, recalled in his deposition that he

> asked them what they wanted of him where Norris [the leader of the crowd] immediately said: Our demand is £2 and Deponent asked what for where Norris said "for these mens time".

Later, this same Norris told John Sloper of West Woodhay that he wanted "£6 for the machines". Similarly, Thomas Chandler of Monk Sherborne in Hampshire deposed that "the mob said generally that they had pulled the machines down and they would be paid for it".[90] Nationally, however, the labourers knew that their appeal for common cause with farmers and landowners, whether voluntary or compulsory, held no sway; they knew that they were up against what Neeson calls "a Parliament of enclosers", and they had no

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essays for E P Thompson (London 1993), p.50.
[88] *Political Register*, 24th March 1832, p.789.
[89] See above, pp.32-4.
[90] PRO ASSI 6/1, pt.3, depositions of the Revd. George John Thomas and John Sloper, 26th November 1830.

illusions as to how successfully they could mount an appeal to the rights and privileges of populism with this Parliament of 'enclosers', modernisers and rationalists.[91]

This tension between the local and the national, the customary and the statutory, was explored in Chapter 1 and it was seen how, at times, there was a clear and self-conscious conflict in the protocol of the Swing crowds between what they interpreted as 'lawful' according to their own customary norms and what was presented to them as lawful according to statute.[92] Often, contemporaries expressed the opinion that the crowds seemed unaware of the offences they might be committing against statute law. "In many instances," claimed the parish officials of Goudhurst in Kent, "they did not know they were breaking the law": Vicar Bond of Weston in Somerset went even further, suggesting that "the rioters in general were under the impression that their proceedings were sanctioned and encouraged by the authorities".[93] There are, of course, a number of interpretations which might be applied to such claims. The first is simple parochialism, that the labourers were so unaware of events outside their parish boundaries they had no idea that their own customary norms and values were not shared elsewhere, and even on a national scale. I would suggest, though, that such an explanation of the labourers' actions and beliefs falls into the developmentalist trap, applying that "condescension" that Edward Thompson so sagely warned us against. When we look at the language of the labourers themselves what becomes clear is that their understanding of the operation of statute law was in fact highly sophisticated, but that under certain circumstances they clearly felt that even the highest national principle must be subordinated to local need. In Chapter 1, it became clear that the Swing crowds were perfectly aware of the statutory illegality of what they were doing, but that they believed (or at least affirmed) that their collective will transcended that law: "there is no law now," they exclaimed, on being warned that they were acting illegally; "the Law is in our hands".[94] Just as Jeanette Neeson suggests that commoners were up against a parliament of enclosers, so the Swing crowds knew that they would inevitably come face to face with the laws of the 'new fashioned' farmer. It was Parliament and the state that had not only sanctioned but encouraged in every conceivable way the engrossing tendencies of farmers, and it was through statute law that the commons and wastes had been enclosed. Parliament and statute law had created, in Cobbett's words, the "Bull-Frog farmers": farmers who "like

[91] Neeson, 'An Eighteenth Century Peasantry', p.50.
[92] See above, p.30.
[93] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix B(1), Part V, pp.246, 408.

the *Bull-Frogs* of the American swamps, have swallowed up the small-farmers, as the Bull-Frogs do the little chirruping frogs".[95] And now, during the period of Swing, it was Whitehall which was foremost in the battle to assert those laws against the customary values applied by many magistrates, landowners and occupiers. Labourers knew, then, that it was Parliament and its laws that had sanctioned and enabled the tendency of some farmers to withdraw from the common table, and they knew that if they were to persuade (or even to coerce) farmers to return they would inevitably have to enforce their own populist values in direct opposition to the laws of the land: "we have had plenty of Law", shouted the leader of the Basingstoke crowd, "we have got the Laws into our own hands and all hollowed Hurrah".[96]

iv) iv *Swing and the Social Agenda of the Labouring Poor*

Briefly, to recap: it has so far been described in this section how populism was applied as a set of values within the popular culture of the labouring poor; how as a value system it was shared, at least in part, by many among the structurally superior in the countryside; and how it was defined by, among other things, the nature of social relations within the locality. It has also been shown that those local social relations were viewed by many to be under threat from the forces of 'modernism' and 'rationalism'; how these forces were most often and most clearly articulated within the language of populism in terms of the behaviour and manners of the 'new fashioned' farmer; and how the solution to the threat of these forces was also seen to be most effectively a local affair. It was proposed that the Swing disturbances mirrored closely the operation of populism within the ballad culture of the labouring poor in the sense that, taken as a whole, both represent 'meta-movements' – movements which exist on a super-regional or even national scale despite not having an orthodox social or political agenda, and which, in their particularities, shifted and changed in form and meaning to accommodate local conditions, becoming essentially intimate local phenomena in operation. Finally, it was noted that it is very difficult to assess the 'success' or 'failure' of the Swing disturbances as a whole, precisely because the normal yardsticks by which the success or failure of a movement could be measured are not applicable to such 'meta-movements'. Locally, the successes of Swing

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[94] See above, p30.
[95] *Political Register*, 28th April 1821, p.274.
[96] HRO 10M57/03/33, Deposition of Sarah Hooper, 24th November 1830 (see above, p.30).

were many: time and again, magistrates and individual employers responded to the labourers' demands for an increase in wages, or for doles of food and drink, or for the destruction of a threshing machine or other piece of agricultural machinery. Cobbett suggested in his open letter that the labourers across the whole of the English agricultural heartlands were better off as a result of the Swing disturbances two years after they were at their worst, and this is a view which is corroborated elsewhere in the evidence. Among the replies to the 1834 Poor Law Commissioners, for example, many respondents pointed to the fact that "wherever such means of intimidation [as 'riots' and fires] have been used, consequent amelioration of the condition of the Poor has taken place": at Goudhurst, Kent, "the general consequence of the riots was a rise in wages and a reduction in cottage rents"; at Battle in Sussex, "one of the consequences has been, that Labourers are better paid, and their wants more attended to". W Gray of Alconbury, Huntingdonshire, stated that the disturbances were caused by "the privation of the agricultural Labourers, and their having no means left [of] showing their situation," and went on to state his opinion that

> it has in some measure answered their end, for though some suffered, the majority are better off: their wages have been increased, land has been let them at a moderate rate.[97]

Undoubtedly, there is evidence that, in the short term at least, labourers gained some local benefit from the disturbances. However, many more of the respondents agreed with W Gray's final assessment that "the evil may abate for a time; but general employment alone can produce permanent advantage".[98] The question remains, then, just what was it that the 'movement' of Swing set out to achieve in practical terms, and how successful was it? This is, of course, the most difficult and in many ways the most contentious issue surrounding the agricultural disturbances of 1830. As we have seen, the 'developmentalist' approach of many historians has resulted in the assessment that the Swing disturbances as a whole were archaic, improvised and largely futile. We have explored in this chapter the alternative suggestion that as local 'moments' within a 'meta-movement' they were often highly successful. Despite this revised assessment, though, it would appear that a significant piece in our theoretical understanding of the operation of the disturbances is still missing. Clearly, the evidence shows that the labourers' demands at a local level were (to the modern mind at least) highly restricted. Bearing in mind E P Thompson's assessment that the Swing crowds were "curiously indecisive", it is worth

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[97] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix B(1), pp.54, 246, 492, 229.
[98] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix B(1), p. 229.

noting that within the context of the deaths of 19 victims of the Special Commissions by hanging, the transportation of 481, and the further imprisonment of 644[99], great personal risks were taken by those involved in the disturbances ostensibly for nothing more than an extra shilling a week in wages or relief, or the destruction of a handful of machines which might more easily (and certainly more safely) have been destroyed covertly, under cover of night. Might Edward Thompson and Hobsbawm and Rudé be correct then; could it not be the case that in the final analysis these were the indecisive and archaic acts of pre-political labourers who lacked the sophistication to recognise the strength of their position and thus ended up with a few piecemeal concessions from farmers and magistrates when they could have gained so much more? In the words of the respondent above, surely it is true that for agricultural labourers in the early nineteenth century, distress "may abate for a time; but general employment alone can produce permanent advantage". Yet the direct demand for better or more regular employment was rarely if ever a central plank of the labourer's demands in 1830, and neither was it a significant result of the risings.

The unasked question, then, is *why* did the labourers not demand a general improvement in their working conditions; having committed themselves to widespread action at great personal risk, why did they not also commit themselves to a programme which would have ameliorated their condition on a more secure and lasting basis? Is it, as is suggested by the developmentalist approach, because they lacked political sophistication, a consciousness of their interests as a class, and the super-regional networks to formulate and pursue a programme of general reform? Or is it that they actively rejected such a programme of reform for the very reason that it would have represented in itself a solution based on the divisive categories of class? Clearly, the evidence of the 'body language' of Swing suggests that the labourers did not lack sophistication. Time and again we see that in their behaviour and in the operation of the customary protocols to which they subscribed the Swing crowds were highly self-conscious; that while they were relatively reserved, even limited, in their material and practical demands, in the making of these demands they showed considerable sophistication. In fact, it might even be suggested that the demands themselves were not of primary importance; or at least, that they were only as important to the Swing crowds as the behavioural protocols within which they were made. In other words, what is being proposed is that the Swing crowds made demands which they knew would (or, at the very

[99] Hobsbawm and Rudé, p.262.

least, should) be met at a local level; that they did this self-consciously, rejecting any demands that could be construed as politically charged or based on the divisive categories of class; and that given the relatively limited nature of those demands, the example of the crowds' behavioural protocols was of central importance to the disturbances. The actions of the Swing crowds were clearly an extension of the populism of the ballads and songs of the labouring poor. We have already seen how ballads such as 'The New Fashioned Farmer' and 'The Old Hat' existed in part to make possible once again the perceived harmonies of the past. Having failed to do so through the operation of 'demotic utopianism', through persuasion and cultural example, the labourers took direct action to show farmers how they ought to behave according to the transcendent moral code of populism.

Farmers and the structurally superior were coerced by the Swing crowds into a symbolic relationship with their labourers and the local poor which corresponded to the populist norms articulated in the ballads and songs and was sanctioned by precedent and populism's transcendent moral code. They were coerced into sharing with the labourers their food and drink and thus were brought again, however reluctantly, to the common table; they were coerced into symbolic agreement with the labourers that threshing machines were a danger to the latter's employment prospects and should be destroyed, even cementing this 'agreement' with payments to the crowds for their 'legitimate' work in dismantling or destroying them; they were coerced, both personally and structurally (in their roles as magistrates or parish officials), into symbolic agreement with the labourers that wages and parish relief were too low and should be raised; and they were coerced by them into 'giving' doles of money (and it became clear in Chapter 1 the lengths to which the crowd would go to ensure that such doles were 'given' and not taken[100]), thus symbolically reinforcing the social compact and the responsibilities inherent in the 'legitimate hierarchy' of the countryside. In fact, it could also be suggested that as far as the labourers were concerned the Swing disturbances were entirely the wrong context for attempting to force through a substantive social agenda; to have done so would have meant accepting and exemplifying that relations in the countryside were essentially, necessarily conflictual and that labourers had grievances which the farmers would not or could not accept. Instead, the labourers confined their practical and material demands to grievances with which farmers, like others in the legitimate hierarchy, would find it

[100] See above, p.31.

extremely difficult in practice to disagree. Statute law might interpret the exaction of money or provisions as 'robbery', but local protocol would just as likely call it a donation; the law might interpret the destruction of a threshing machine as a crime against property, but magistrates were just as likely to consider it perfectly legitimate within the context of local social relations. What was radical about Swing, then, was not so much the demands of the crowds but their behaviour. Within the context of rural populism, they sought to bring the farmers to heel not by exacting wholesale or substantial concessions in terms of material or social benefits, but by demonstrating to them how they ought to behave within the social compact, and demanding that they conform – symbolically at least – to such norms of behaviour.

Occasionally, the crowds even coerced the structurally superior *physically* back within the social compact, requiring them to take an active part in the events of Swing alongside the labourers themselves. It was seen in Chapter 1 how Sir Thomas Baring at one stage became, symbolically at least, the head of the crowd which was processing through his estate breaking machines and exacting promises and doles of money.[101] Elsewhere too, large farmers and others were pressed by the crowds into symbolic attendance or even leadership of the crowds. Having given a promise to increase wages, J Stay (or Bray) of Oxfordshire

> gave [the crowd] plenty of bread & cheese & about 90Gs. of beer and desired them to be peaceable on their way, but I must go with them. It was no use to refuse them...[T]aking me as their leader when I got to Chas. Rowe's I told them that I had conducted them through our parish and I was unable to go any further.

Sometimes, it was parish officials who were requested or required to attend the crowd. The Basingstoke crowd that unsuccessfully asked Harris Bigg Wither junr. to accompany them, was also unable to persuade the local overseer to join them: John Follett of Pamber deposed that the crowd

> went away for a short time and then came back and asked me if I was Overseer of the parish. I said I was – They then enquired if I was to go with them – and rose a Hurrah – I said I should not go with them – they said then I must give them something – I offered Burgess half a crown...

A crowd at Cranbrook, Kent, was more successful, however: Edward Young reported to the Home Office that

> I told [them] I was a magistrate, that I had heard their object, that I would read the riot act, that they should not pass on farther to Mr Ferris's house without our resistance. They declared that they had no such intention of using force, but that they were in distress that the overseers of the poor who were with them had not money to pay them on Saturday night, & that they came for assistance from their minister.[102]

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[101] See above, p.39.
[102] See above, p.31; PRO HO52/7/65, J Bray or Stay to J J Lockhart (n.d.); HRO 10M57/03/33, deposition

Here, then, is the strongest evidence that for the Swing crowds the symbolic enforcement of the social compact on those who were perceived to have strayed from it was at least as important as the actual material demands they made.

This is not to suggest, though, that the crowds did not have, and did not share, a coherent social agenda. Rather, it is to point to the way that that social agenda might best be enforced. What is here being suggested is that the agenda of the Swing crowds cannot be located in their immediate demands, which were essentially and necessarily localised and limited to areas of broad consensus within the countryside. Instead, we need to look again at the ballads and songs of the labouring poor to locate more thoroughly the concerns which underpinned the actions of the agricultural labourers in 1830. We have already seen how certain issues recur again and again in the ballads of the 1820s and 1830s; how they lament the passing of the 'tradition' of common board between master and man; how they scorn the farmer who withdraws from the plough in favour of the pleasures of the parlour and the hunt. But there is a far more direct and radical preoccupation which recurs in the 'complaint' or 'protest' ballads of the labouring poor; one which is implicit in all of these other issues, and one at which we have hinted already. The real reason why farmers' manners and behaviour were seen to have changed so radically since the beginning of the French wars was the engrossment of land and the resulting disappearance of small farmers. As 'The Poor Labourers' indicates:

> Some pity the farmers, but I tell you now,
> Pity poor labourers that follow the plough,
> Pity poor children half starving and then,
> Divide every great farm into ten.[103]

This call to divide large farms is echoed again and again in the ballads:

> May God bless the poor of England,
> And raise some honest heart,
> For to relieve their distresses,
> Who have long felt the smart;
> And take all the large farms away,
> And divide them into ten,
> Then we may be as happy
> As ever we were then.[104]

Sometimes, the appeal to divide farms is reinforced by a direct appeal to the past or the application of perceived precedent:

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of John Follet, 24th November 1830; PRO HO 52/8/166, Edward young to Home Office, 11th November 1830.

[103] 'The Poor Labourers', see Appendix.

[104] 'Former Days', see Appendix.

> When 50 acres they did rent then money we did save,
> But now for to support their pride 500 they must have;
> But if each great farm was taken in and divided into ten,
> We might see happy days again among industrious men.[105]

Always, though, engrossment is seen as the root cause of the changing nature of farmers' manners, of deteriorating social relations between farmers and men, and of the immiseration of farm labourers:

> Now to conclude and make an end of these my simple rhymes,
> May old fashions revive again and all see better times,
> May rents come down and all great farms be parted into ten,
> Then servants will get better wages and all will stop again.[106]

It has already been noted that this is a preoccupation which was closely shared by William Cobbett. He deplored the actions of the "Bull-Frog farmers" who, "like the *Bull-Frogs* of the American swamps, have swallowed up the small-farmers, as the Bull-Frogs do the little chirruping frogs". But he also firmly believed that sooner or later "the land will change tenants as well as owners", and in this he closely echoed the ballads:

> for, it will soon be discovered that a *division of farms* will be absolutely necessary to insure any rent to the owner. Idle, indeed, is the notion that the land will be *thrown up* and will be fallow. It will still be cultivated. It will still produce food and raiment; but the farmers will become more numerous and the paupers less numerous.[107]

Cobbett was predictably vocal in his support for the breaking up of large farms. As we shall see in the final chapter, he shared with the labourers not only a sophisticated understanding of the material results of engrossment, but also an ideological vision of a life best lived which was based on the 'cottage charter' and which was fundamentally opposed to the very principle of the engrossment of land. He was not alone, though, among the structurally superior in his support of the labourers' position that the root of their distress lay in engrossment, and in his echo of this aspect of the ballads' populism. The issue of engrossment (and the concomitant issue of enclosure) was one of the most contentious of the later-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries; with hindsight, it seems clear that the modernisers who supported large farms and the engrossment of land – whether from practical or financial considerations – were clearly ascendant in this period. At the time, however, the endgame was not so obvious: even as late as the 1820s and 1830s, the question was not quite so settled and the voices of those who decried the continued advancement of large farms at the expense of small was often as loud as those who opposed them. Magistrate Francis Pym Jr. of Cambridge, for example, was certain not only of the material effect that it had on the lives of the labourers, but that it was a

[105] 'Swaggering Farmers', see Appendix.
[106] 'We Will Not Stop Again', see Appendix.

fundamental cause in the increase in crime as well:

> Have there been very great revolution [*sic*] in agricultural property in the county of Cambridgeshire within a few years?- Very great.
> So that many are reduced from the situation of yeomen to that of labourer?- Many are reduced from the situation of farmers to that of labourers...
> Do you attribute any thing of the increase of crime to the results of those revolution [*sic*] in property?- The farmers' means have generally been diminished for employing labourers, and the want of employment has certainly increased crime.

Thomas Law Hodges, MP, from whom we heard earlier, echoes the point made by Keith Snell when he explicitly linked the decline of living-in to the disappearance of small farmers:

> Within my own knowledge, with the exception of three or four, I can remember all the farmers in my own parish to have sprung from the labourers; but that state of things has entirely gone by, and the labourers are inhabiting cottages, instead of residing, as they used to, in the families of their masters.

As late as 1834, witnesses to the Commission on the Poor Laws continued to lament the loss of small farmers and the effect that such a loss had had on rural social relations:

> Since the abolition of small farms, it has been observed, that there is nothing between 10s. a week and a large occupation: and a familiar metaphor has been used, that all the intermediate staves in the ladder have been removed.[108]

Contemporaries sought to rectify the situation with a range of contrivances, such as Richard Mackenzie Bacon's scheme for home colonization.[109] Mackenzie Bacon's scheme was part of a whole raft of proposals of varying degrees of usefulness which emerged between the time of the Swing risings and the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act, all of which were primarily aimed at addressing the twin problems of the un- and underemployment of labourers, and the spiralling cost of poor relief. Joseph Marriage, from whom we also heard earlier[110], published a pamphlet in which he proposed something similar:

> The plan I venture submit is – First, that in every part of the country where estates are large enough to admit the separation of land for the purpose, and the population is numerous enough to require it, commodious cottages be built, and an acre or two of land attached to each, to be let to industrious labourers, who should pay fair rent for the cottages, and as much per acre as the average paid by the neighbouring farmers...Second – That a few small farms of from 5 to 15 and 20 acres each be allotted in like manner, that

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[107] *Political Register*, 28th April 1821, p.274; 11th March 1821, p.761.
[108] *Report of the Select Committee on the Cause of Increase in the Number of Criminal Commitments and Convictions in England and Wales* 1827, pp.22-3; 1831 *Select Committee on Poor Laws*, p.23 (see above, p.79; 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws,* Appendix A(1), 'Reports from Commissioners', p.227.
[109] Mackenzie Bacon's proposal was to pass a general enclosure act through the operation of which land would be compulsorily purchased either by government or by individual parishes on which houses with considerable land attached (two to four acres, depending on family size) would be erected for the use of unemployed and underemployed labourers. The scheme, originally formulated by Lord Suffield of Gunton Park, Norfolk, was advanced by Mackenzie Bacon in his capacity as editor and proprietor of the *Norwich Mercury*. For further details see T B Norgate, *The History of Costessey* (Norwich 1972).
[110] See above, p.77.

> when a labourer and his family have acquired, by their industry and frugality, sufficient property to take a larger allotment, it may be in their power to obtain it.[111]

Popular access to the land was, of course, a problem that attracted much more radical proposals as well. The Spenceans took the most radical stance of all, urging that private ownership of land be abolished and that "the territory [be] declared to be the people's farm; that there be no other tenure than the leasehold of the public".[112] If the Spenceans operated on the fringes of ultra-Radical land reform, then other less radical proposals attracted large numbers of supporters. As Malcolm Chase suggests,

> though further research is needed to establish how prevalent popular participation in the market for land was, it may suggest that the numerous radical land societies of the 1830s and 1840s were in one sense purely the culmination of authentic tradition.

But these radical land societies were, as Chase indicates, largely urban and industrial phenomena; they were an increasing part of the Radical platform, a means of ensuring full employment and thereby maintaining upward pressure on industrial and manufacturing wages.[113]

It is perhaps surprising, on the face of it, that the various schemes to increase popular access to land were never an explicit part of rural populism. Despite the widespread and consistent appeal of the 'protest' ballads of the 1820s and 1830s against the engrossment of land and the disappearance of small farms, nowhere is the specific demand made for such access to be given or returned to labourers, and nowhere is a specific plan for the break-up of large farms advanced. As we shall see in the final chapter, this is not to suggest that access to land was not a major concern of rural labourers. Indeed, precisely the opposite is true; access to land was part of an ideological commitment to the 'cottage charter' which was played out consistently within in the rhetoric of the rural ballads and songs and was central to the value system of rural populism. Rather, the important point here is that the labourers were reluctant to endorse – indeed, they maintained an ideological commitment *against* – any formal scheme or programme which might imply a shift of the rural balance of power, and home colonization or a widespread programme of building cottages and small farms (let alone the aims of radical land societies and Spencean programmes) did just that by encouraging the voluntary or enforced redistribution of land from landlords and tenants to labourers. What is clear from the ballads, from 'The Poor Labourers', 'Former Days' and

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[111] J Marriage, *Cottage Husbandry; or the means of rendering the agricultural labourer independent of parish relief, and thereby, raising his moral character* (Chelmsford 1830).

[112] Robert Wedderburn quoted in M Chase, *The People's Farm: English radical agrarianism, 1775-1840* (London 1988), p.2.

[113] Chase, pp.10-11.

'Swaggering Farmers', is that engrossment and the disappearance of small farms was a major concern – if not *the* major concern – for agricultural labourers; that they understood very clearly that it had led to the changing nature of rural relationships and ultimately to their immiseration and distress. What is also clear, though, is that consistent with the operation of the Swing crowds labourers sought changes in these relationships only insofar as they could be brought about within a framework of common cause and social harmony. Along with the actions of the Swing crowds, the ballads and songs of the labouring poor were (in the words again of Edward Thompson) "curiously unbloodthirsty"; the changes they desired of farmers and the structurally superior were rarely demanded, and were almost always framed in the nature of a request. This does not necessarily diminish the power of those requests; no-one who reads 'Swaggering Farmers' or 'The Poor Labourers' can be left in any doubt either of the labourers' strength of feeling on the subject of engrossment, or that the break-up of existing large farms is a required outcome. But it is inconsistent with the operation of populism that such an outcome should have been achieved against the will of the farmers themselves.

To return again to the assessment of Patrick Joyce, populism "points to a set of discourses and identities which are extra-economic in character, and inclusive and universalizing in their social remit".[114] In the ballads and songs, just as in the operation of the Swing crowds, labourers sought to 'persuade' farmers to return to the common cause of all those who had an interest in agriculture. In reality, of course, they knew by the beginning of the nineteenth century that large farmers would not simply break up their farms and agree to the redistribution of the land out of the kindness of their hearts or because of the appeal of songs like 'Swaggering Farmers'. But they also knew that farmers and modernisers would bitterly oppose at every step the enforced break-up of farms, the compulsory or statutory redistribution of land, and a return to small farming on a wide scale; they knew they were up against a 'Parliament of engrossers' (to paraphrase Jeanette Neeson) and so they chose to exert as much pressure as they could locally through their customs and culture. When this failed, they took that customary culture out into the lanes and fields and the driveways of large farms and sought to enforce the norms and the values of populism through example and coercion. In a sense, the labourers circumvented the need to call on farmers to change their farming practices directly by first appealing, and finally demanding, that they make common cause with them once

[114] Joyce, p.11.

again, that they act and behave as farmers did in 'olden times'. In the words of 'We Will Not Stop Again':

> May old fashions revive again and all see better times,
> May rents come down and all great farms be parted into ten,
> Then servants will get better wages and all will stop again.[115]

It would be wrong, then, to suggest that agricultural labourers had no clear social agenda; but it would be equally misguided to try and 'read' either the songs – even the 'protest' songs of the 1820s and 1830s – or the demands of the Swing crowds as though they can tell us descriptively or straightforwardly what that social agenda was. Within the terms of their customary culture, the glue that held together both the movement of Swing and the values of populism, they had no need to outline it in great detail; indeed, it would have diminished its claim if they had been required to do so. Rather, it was sufficient merely to call on farmers to 'return' to the norms of 'olden times', understanding that all those who should form the legitimate hierarchy of the countryside would recognise both the unspoken content and the transcendent legitimacy of such a call. But the modern historian has no such luxury, and it is therefore incumbent on us to uncover in more detail the way that that social agenda operated within the values of populism. Clearly, engrossment and a return to small farms were central preoccupations, and we have already begun to explore the way that they impacted on the issue of common cause between farmers and labourers. Implicit in both, of course, is the issue of land and its occupation, and it is on this and the issues surrounding it that the final chapter will concentrate more fully.

[115] 'We Will Not Stop Again', see Appendix.

CHAPTER 3: Allotments, the 'Cottage Charter', and the Question of Land

One of the most intractable problems for the historian of social relations in the early-nineteenth century English countryside is the question of land, its ownership, tenure, and accessibility. The debate surrounding the social and economic impact of parliamentary enclosure between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries is, perhaps, the most widely known and obvious example of this. Where other questions of social and economic history may encourage lively debate within a framework of general agreement, enclosure has historians placing themselves firmly at one or other end of the spectrum. The debate is well-known, and there is no need to rehearse it in depth here. What is important is the very fact that it has been characterised by seemingly polar opposites. On the one hand, there is the view still most clearly crystallised in the work of the Hammonds which places the common rights of the poor at the very centre of their economic well-being arguing, therefore, that parliamentary enclosure was the final nail in the coffin of an older 'peasant' economy of labourers at least partially independent of the wage. On the other, there is the alternative viewpoint most comprehensively articulated by Chambers and Mingay which seeks to dismiss such a view, suggesting that the common rights of the poor were in reality worth little or nothing, and that the very process of enclosure produced new forms of labour and new farming practices whose benefits far outweighed any losses for agricultural labourers.[1]

If this over-simplification of the debate adds somewhat to its caricature, it does at least serve to show how far apart the protagonists have tended to place themselves. More recently the debate has moved away from what was largely an economic evaluation of commons and common rights for labourers, and towards the question of how far such rights were, formally or informally, actually enjoyed by the labourers themselves. Jane Humphries, for example, suggests that we should look beyond the simple division of 'commoners' with common rights on the one hand and 'agricultural proletarians' with none on the other. Rather, she describes a continuum within which labourers with no access to commons or to common rights were nevertheless able to maintain a degree of independence from the wage through a variety of informal mechanisms. Leigh Shaw-

[1] J L and B Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (London 1911); J D Chamber & G E Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880* (London, 1966).

Taylor takes issue with Humphries' (and others') assumptions with regard to who was actually able to make use of such mechanisms, both formal and informal, suggesting that most often it was not the labouring poor who could do so but an intermediate class of small farmers or proprietors. He goes on to suggest that one reason for this category error is the imprecise language used by contemporary writers on the subject and the resulting tendency among contemporaries and later historians to divide those who peopled the eighteenth and nineteenth century rural landscape into 'farmers' (i.e. more or less substantial occupiers of land) and 'labourers' who were essentially land*less*. "It is absolutely necessary," he goes on, "not to extrapolate carelessly from the undoubted maltreatment of large numbers of individuals to the unevidenced assumption that this was the general experience of the labouring poor at enclosure".[2]

One thing is certain, however: whichever way the debate has moved, it has remained largely economistic and this, I would suggest, is what has led to its being so obviously polarised. By 'economistic' I mean that the debate has continued to revolve around the economic value of commons, common rights, and non-monetary perquisites (such as access to cow-pasture) and the concomitant economic effects of enclosure. This is true not only of the work of those historians who have sought to minimise the economic value of common rights for agricultural labourers, but also of that of historians of commoning and enclosure whose outlook is more expansive and who have tried to explain the wider social effects of the loss of commons to labourers and others. One notable exception to this is Jeanette Neeson who has written the most important and comprehensive recent work on the subject. In it, she is at pains to show how it was not simply a matter of material loss or gain, that commoning encouraged interdependence, mutuality, and what might be called a 'culture of sufficiency', whereas enclosure destroyed this complex social web and made the labourer totally dependent – on employers or the parish.[3] But in the final analysis, even Neeson's work seems to underestimate the *psychological* impact of land on popular consciousness, and therefore the true psychological impact of radically changing patterns of land ownership, tenure and accessibility for villagers and labourers.

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[2] Jane Humphries, 'Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women: the proletarianization of families in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries' in *Journal of Economic History*, 1 (1990); L Shaw Taylor, 'Labourers, Cows, Common Rights and Parliamentary Enclosure: the evidence of contemporary comment, c.1760-1810' in *Past and Present*, 171 (2001).

[3] Jeanette Neeson, *Commoners: common right, enclosure and social change in England, 1700-1820*

i) The Psychological Impact of Changing Land Use

This is, of course, a problematic path for the historian to tread. How is it possible to quantify, or even realistically to evaluate, the psychological significance of land to the labouring poor? Yet an attempt at such an evaluation is essential if we are to make a reasonable assessment of the effect of the changing social relations in the early nineteenth-century countryside. The land, the land*scape*, was not and could not have been merely a physical manifestation for those who lived and worked in it of their material well-being. It was also – and was perhaps more importantly – a kind of mental map of who they were as individuals and communities, of where they had been and where they were going: in a sense, the landscape provided a narrative for their lives. Writing of the commons and wastes and of those who made use of them, George Bourne (or Sturt) who spoke of the way that

> when, on an auspicious evening of spring, a man and wife went out far across the common to get rushes for the wife's hop-tying, of course it was a consideration of thrift that sent them off; but an idea of doing the right piece of country routine at the right time gave value to the little expedition...And thus, the succession of recurring tasks, each one of which seemed to the villager almost characteristic of his own people in their native home, kept constantly alive a feeling that satisfied him and a usage that helped him. The feeling was that he belonged to a set of people rather apart from the rest of the world – a people necessarily different from others in their manners, and perhaps poorer and ruder than many, but yet fully entitled to respect and consideration.

This sense of being 'a race apart' is clearly linked to the identification between labourer and landscape, so that he "did not merely reside" in it: "he was part of it and it was part of him. He fitted into it as one of its native denizens, like the hedgehogs and the thrushes. All that happened to it happened to him".[4] Such direct testimony from those who lived as a part of the landscape themselves (either as labourers or alongside them – Bourne was in fact a wheelwright by trade) is inevitably rare, and so his incisive and sympathetic account is all the more valuable for that. But others, too, have spoken of the way in which the landscape shaped and influenced rural popular consciousness.

Bob Bushaway, for example, writes of "a coherent and alternative set of beliefs and practices" which were at work in nineteenth century rural England, and he locates these 'alternative beliefs' in "the relationship of the individual to place, the natural world, the working environment," as well as in all "human life and the supernatural":

> Alternative belief was essentially anthropocentric and interconnected rather than merely fatalistic. It was based upon a direct and interconnected relationship between the events of

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(Cambridge 1993), esp. p.41; see also below, pp.137-9.

[4] Neeson, p.179.

> human life and those of the natural and supernatural worlds.[5]

We can see shadows of this 'alternative belief' at work in accounts by folklorists and others of popular rituals. James Obelkevich, in his discussion of the uses of religion in rural society, uses the example of the Lincolnshire marshmen, who

> were reluctant to chop elder wood without first asking 'the Old Lady's leave' or 'the Old Gal's leave'...'Owd Gal, give me of thy wood, an' oi will give some of moine, when I graws iner a tree'.

Obelkevich goes on to suggest that

> villagers envisioned a Nature that was still alive, that had not been neutralized or desacralized by the Reformation or by science. It was still saturated with the traditional meanings and powers, and though villagers did not find it friendly, it was not autonomous or inaccessible. For between the natural world and the human there were continuities, correspondences, designated channels for action.[6]

The nature of this dependent relationship between village labourers and the landscape is, it seems to me, of the greatest importance when considering the changes that took place in land ownership, tenure and accessibility between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries. In it, we can see hints of griefs and losses other than the purely economic. Enclosure – the 'fencing in and fencing out' of landscape – and the engrossment of land not only entailed a usurpation of certain material privileges. Of at least as much importance was the fact that it was also a usurpation of the very identity of the village labourer, who became 'fenced out' of his own mental, as well as material landscape. This, too, was something that found echoes in contemporary accounts of changes in the countryside.

One of the most common complaints about the effects of enclosure and the engrossment of land was that it led to rural depopulation. "In the counties of Leicester and Northampton," wrote Stephen Addington in 1772,

> where inclosing has lately prevailed, the decrease of inhabitants in almost all the inclosed villages in which they have had no inconsiderable manufactory, is obvious enough to be remarked by everyone that knew their state twenty or thirty years ago and sees them now...They have know upwards of an hundred houses and families in some open-field villages, that have since dwindled to eight or ten...a plain proof this, that inclosing depopulates the country.[7]

Certainly, William Cobbett was convinced that this was the case in 1822:

> the farm-houses are not so many as they were forty years ago by three-fourths. That is to say, the infernal system of Pitt and his followers has annihilated three parts out of four of the farm-houses. The labourers' houses disappear also. And all the *useful* people become less numerous...[On the newly enclosed land] there are all manner of schemes to get rid of

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[5] Bob Bushaway, "'Tacit, Unsuspected but still Implicit Faith': Alternative Belief in Nineteenth-Century Rural England' in T Harris (ed.), *Popular Culture in England, c.1500-1850* (London 1995), pp.194-5.
[6] J M Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsay 1825-1875* (Oxford, 1976), pp.282, 307.
[7] Shaw-Taylor, p.102.

> the necessity of hands.[8]

The debate about eighteenth and early-nineteenth century rural depopulation is still a live one. Historians have long argued that statistically the reality was quite different; that the actual numbers of people resident in the countryside did not fall in this period, and that in fact they continued to rise until the middle of the century.[9] And yet, like Cobbett and Addington, many contemporaries were convinced that this *was* the case. The very title of Goldsmith's 1775 lament speaks volumes: 'The Deserted Village' was a place where "desolation saddens all thy green," where "the long grass o'ertops the mouldering wall," and where "far, far away thy children leave the land".[10] So how are we to explain this apparent paradox?

There is something at work here that is, perhaps, analogous to the 'fencing out' of labourers from their own mental landscape suggested above. The villages may not have become 'de-peopled' in the strictest sense – the villagers were still there, and in many cases were increasing in number – but the landscape certainly had. The process of enclosure, of engrossment, and the consequent increase in extensive farming changed the landscape completely, both physically and psychologically. Many small farms required many small buildings; one large farm required few. Commons and wastes encouraged a certain amount of encroachment; enclosure wiped it away. Open fields and small farms required many hands and much attention; great fields of wheat required many fewer, and then only at certain seasons. Not only would this new landscape look different, but it would *feel* very different too. Goldsmith saw in this landscape a desert, a scene of "desolation". In a very different context, the anarchist Peter Kropotkin saw something very similar:

> How can it be that land be cultivated when there is nobody to cultivate it? 'We have fields, men go by but never go in', an old labourer said to me; and so it is in reality. Man is conspicuous by his absence from those meadows; he rolls them with a heavy roller in the spring; he spreads manure every two or three years, then he disappears until the time has come to make hay.[11]

Even now, this is a lament that occasionally finds voice. John Seymour, reflecting on a farm of 10,000 acres in 1976, urged

> cut that land (exhausted as it is) up into a thousand plots of ten acres each, give each plot to

[8] William Cobbett, *Rural Rides: Vols. 1&2* (first published 1830: Penguin Classics edn., London 1985), pp.66-7.
[9] See, for example, A F Webster, *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century* (2nd. edn., New York 1963), pp.49-50, who came to this conclusion on an analysis of the census records as early as 1899.
[10] O Goldsmith, 'The Deserted Village' (1775) from Tom Davis (ed.), *Oliver Goldsmith: Poems and Plays* (London 1975).
[11] Quoted in C Ward and D Crouch, *The Allotment* (London, 1988), p.35.

> a family trained to use it, and within ten years the production coming from it would be enormous...The motorist wouldn't have the satisfaction of looking out over a vast, treeless, hedgeless prairie of indifferent barley – but he could get out of his car and wander through a seemingly huge area of diverse countryside, orchards, young tree plantations, a myriad of small plots of land growing a multiplicity of different crops.[12]

The parallels between this modern appeal and that of Cobbett two centuries ago are striking:

> suppose that the land could be ploughed, and the corn cut and carted as well as thrashed by machinery, there would be a country *with crops*, but *without people.*[13]

It starts to become clear, then, that the psychological losses involved in changing land-use at the turn of the nineteenth century were enormous. The devastation felt by William Cobbett, Stephen Addington and Oliver Goldsmith – and many others of similar mind – is plain to see. What is less plain, however, is how deeply that devastation was felt by those who were most directly affected by such changes, the labourers themselves. The process of proletarianization – hotly contested by contemporaries and modern historians alike – was not merely a question of use rights, of income and expenditure, or of relative employment levels. It was a question of ways of living and of belief systems; it was fundamentally a question of individual and collective *identity*. This is not to idealise the open fields of an earlier period, and neither is it to overstate the access or advantages labourers and villagers had where commons and wastes existed. But as George Bourne observed through his own and his neighbours' experience,

> [t]o the enclosure of the common more than to any other cause may be traced all the changes which have subsequently passed over the village. It was like knocking the keystone out of an arch. The keystone is not the arch; but, once it is gone, all sorts of forces, previously resisted, begin to operate towards ruin, and gradually the whole structure crumbles down.[14]

Understanding changing patterns of land ownership, occupancy and use is, then, crucial to an understanding of changing social relations in the first half of the nineteenth century. By the eighteen-twenties and thirties Bourne's 'keystone' had been knocked out of many, if not most, of the rural communities in the south of England through a process of enclosure and the engrossment of land. How far his ruinous forces had begun to operate on such communities, and how far their economic and social structures had crumbled beyond repair as a result is, however, contingent on many more factors than just enclosure and engrossment. In a different context, James Obelkevich has shown how popular religious practices and beliefs survived the great modernising forces of rationalism and

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[12] Quoted in Ward and Crouch, p.37.
[13] *Political Register*, 4th December 1830, p.873.
[14] Keith Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor 1600-1900* (Cambridge 1985), p.166.

established religion. Bob Bushaway too has indicated the ways in which 'alternative belief' systems survived these forces, as well as the apparently relentless process of agricultural proletarianization. One question that remains to be answered is how far individuals and rural communities wished, or were able, to retain the older psychological bonds to the land and to landscape which George Bourne describes as contingent on commons and commoning. In addressing this question it is important to bear in mind that despite the prevailing orthodoxy changing patterns of land ownership, accessibility and tenure in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not take place in a straightforward linear way, moving inexorably, like a juggernaut, from the diffuse to the exclusive: like most issues in social history the story is far more complex than that. Indeed, there is *one* mechanism which came into existence in the early nineteenth century whereby previously landless labourers were given access to plots of land (and by no means insubstantial plots) for their own and their families' use, and did so at least partly as a result of the enclosure of commons and wastes: the proliferation of cottage (or garden) allotments.

ii) The Historiography of Early Allotment Provision

The nineteenth century allotment movement has a limited historiography, and until relatively recently it was deemed unworthy of serious historical comment.[15] There are a number of reasons why this should be the case, some of which are tied up with the issues mentioned in the introduction above. It has been suggested that the debate over changing patterns of land use in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has tended to provoke polar reactions. However, despite this polarity it has also been characterised by a tacit understanding as to the underlying *nature* of those changing patterns. No matter on which side of the enclosure debate historians place themselves all agree that villagers – in fact the 'structurally inferior' in general – lost out when it came to access to the land in favour of engrossing land-owners and the new breed of large farmers. Indeed, all agree that this was a period characterised by the systematic conglomeration of agricultural land into fewer and fewer hands. The provision of allotments for labourers does not fit

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[15] D C Barnett, 'Allotments and the Problem of Rural Poverty, 1780-1840' in E L Jones and G E Mingay (eds.), *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution* (London 1967); J Archer, 'The Nineteenth-Century Allotment: half an acre and a row' in *Economic History Review*, L(1) (1997); J Burchardt, 'Rural Social Relations, 1830-50: opposition to allotments for labourers' in *Agricultural History Review*, v.45(II) (1997) and 'Land, Labour and Politics: Parliament and allotment provision, 1830-70' in J R Wordie (ed.), *Agriculture and Politics in England, 1815-1939* (London 2000); B Moselle, 'Allotments, Enclosure, and proletarianization in Early Nineteenth-Century Southern England' in *Economic History*

comfortably within this picture, and it could be suggested that this is one reason why it has tended to be overlooked. When the historical silence over allotments was finally broken by D C Barnett in 1967 the tenor for future contributions was largely set by his assertion that

> in a sense this was less a programme of social progress than a backward-looking appeal to a golden age of landholding peasantry, a fairly typical reaction of a conservative section of rural society in an age of profound social change.[16]

The reasoning behind this assertion is that the allotment 'movement' was led locally and nationally by landowners, clerics and other notables and that as a result it can only be viewed as a patrician movement motivated by considerations of social control. Thirty years later, John Archer forcefully echoed Barnett's assessment when he wrote that

> allotments were, for philanthropic landowners and churchmen, primarily about moral issues and moral improvements...Allotments, along with many other forms of philanthropic gestures from the 1830s, suggested that in some parishes landlords and rectors were attempting to reassert their authority or at least provide an additional source of authority...[T]he labouring community was either to be tied down 'by gifts that might be ropes' or placed in continued subjection to its employers.[17]

Others have subsequently entered the debate – most notably the agricultural historian Jeremy Burchardt – but none within the social history community has seriously challenged this model of allotments as a social control measure.

Another reason why allotments have been largely ignored as a subject of historical interest is their perceived marginality. Those recent historians who have tackled the subject have tended towards the consensus that few labourers actually had access to allotments before the 1850s. On closer inspection, however, the picture is far from clear. Jeremy Burchardt, for example, states that before 1829 there were only around 10,000 allotment plots in existence nationwide, yet the majority of his evidence comes from a single source, the publications and archives of the *Labourers' Friends Society*, whose members sought to provide and to lobby for the provision of allotments for labourers, and of which we will hear much more later.[18] Barnett also makes a fairly confident prediction about allotment provision, suggesting that by the early-1830s, "[o]ver the country as a whole allotment schemes were known in about 42% of parishes, though in many of these only one or two labourers would have possessed land".[19] Yet Barnett's sole source of information appears to be the responses to Question 20 of the 'Rural Queries' in the *Poor*

Review XLVIII (3) (1995).

[16] Barnett, p.172.

[17] Archer, pp.25-6.

[18] Burchardt, 'The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873' (unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Reading, 1997), p.248.

Law Commissioners, First Report of 1834: 'Whether any Land let to Labourers; if so, the quantity to each, and at what Rent?'[20] Useful as the information provided by these responses is in building an approximate model of allotment provision in the early-1830s, it can hardly be said to be exhaustive given that only around 10% of all parishes actually responded to the questionnaire. A final reason for the relative lack of historical interest in early-nineteenth century allotments is that they are often characterised as a minor, even marginal element in the contemporary debate over changes to poor law provision, and one which is of little relevance when considering those changes as a whole. Again, to cite Barnett,

> in general terms, the movement to help the rural poor by giving them small amounts of land was very much in accord with contemporary theories of social welfare – at once philanthropic and paternalistic, and also hostile to action by the State...If, in the early 1830s, State intervention in some form or another had seemed rather more expedient, that, too, might have occurred, but in the event, another, apparently truly radical, solution to the problem of the poor was adopted.[21]

It is certainly true that a great deal of the information that has come down to us about allotments and allotment provision is found in the parliamentary papers of the time, and particularly in the evidence given, and the reports made, to the various commissions and committees on the Poor Laws. Indeed, Barnett openly avows that "the main sources of information are the evidence appended to the Poor Law Report of 1834 and that given to the House of Lords Poor Law Committee of 1831," alongside "the publications of the *Labourers' Friend Society* and the various other similar societies, and the agricultural surveys carried out at the initiative of the Board of Agriculture from 1793 onwards".[22]

Despite its limited scope, then, the historiography of the provision of allotments or small plots of land to rural labourers in the early-nineteenth century has itself become something of an orthodoxy. Allotment provision is characterised as part of a matrix of measures favoured by paternalist landowners and patrician clerics eager to extend their moral and economic influence over the labourers. It is assumed to have been of limited value to the labourers themselves because land simply could not be found in sufficient quantity to provide more than a nominal number of allotments, and it is viewed as a minor – and in the event, a marginal – part of the debate over changes in the poor laws. There is, inevitably, some truth in all these positions but they in no way tell the whole story of

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[19] Barnett, p.172.
[20] *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, 1834, Appendix B(1) 'Answers to Rural Queries in Five Parts', Part 5, Question 20.
[21] Barnett, p.183.
[22] Barnett, p.167n.

allotments and many questions remain unanswered. Within the context of the present study one of the most interesting aspects of allotment provision in the first-half of the nineteenth century is that a sea-change undoubtedly occurred in the year 1830. Jeremy Burchardt suggests that within the archives of the *Labourers' Friend Society* "the total number of [allotment] sites recorded as being created in all years before 1830 is less than the total number of sites recorded as being created in the one year 1830".[23] Archer agrees in his study of Norfolk and Suffolk:

> The real catalyst for the introduction and the eventual spread – albeit slow – of allotments was endemic rural unrest...The first established garden allotment which I have been able to document refers to Sir Henry Bunbury's experiment in the west Suffolk parish of Great Barton at the end of 1816, about six months after the food and anti-machinery riots...Interest from landowners and parsons only really began to gather momentum with the onset of the Captain Swing riots in 1830.[24]

These quotes, and the evidence from the sources which bears them out, surely tell us something very interesting about the provision of allotments for labourers; that there is a direct correlation between rural unrest in the early years of the nineteenth century and the provision of land for labourers. What none of the commentators has so far established – or, I would venture to suggest, has seriously attempted to establish – is the precise nature of this correlation and what, if any, its implications are for the social history of the period. If, on even the most cursory survey of the evidence, it becomes obvious that the rural unrest of 1830 caused an explosion in the actual provision of allotments for labourers, then it must be possible to unpick the reasons why this should be the case. If, as Ian Dyck has suggested, the allotment movement was "probably *the most lasting effect* of the rising" (my emphasis), then the need to do so is surely all the more urgent.[25] For had the provision of allotments been *purely* a matter of social control – merely another mechanism by which the locally influential could add to their influence over the lives of labourers – then surely the events of 1830 would have made little difference to the numbers of allotments occupied by labourers. After all, labourers could not be forced to cultivate allotments of land and nowhere is there evidence to suggest that they were so coerced. In fact, even John Archer is forced to admit that notwithstanding his central thesis, "there is...one important qualification which needs to be recognized, namely that demand for allotments outstripped their supply".[26] As we shall see, labourers would often go to extraordinary lengths to gain and to keep them; and yet within the heightened

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[23] Burchardt, 'The Allotment Movement in England', p.80.
[24] Archer, pp.23-4.
[25] Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge 1992), p.185.
[26] Archer, p.29.

atmosphere of the time land *was* found in greater quantity than ever before. Rather than merely a social control measure, after 1830 allotments must surely be viewed as part of a network of concessions made to protesting labourers which included increases in wages and poor relief, the discontinuance of agricultural machinery, remission and rebates of tithes and rent to farmers (in order to enable them to pay higher wages) and, at times, the removal of unpopular parish officials and practices. The difference, of course, is that those other concessions were usually short-lived; allotments, on the other hand, were a permanent reminder of the concessions wrung from the authorities in the countryside by the Swing crowds.

On the second question – whether or not allotments were provided in significant enough numbers to have been anything other than a marginal social and historical phenomenon – the answer is less clear. I have already suggested that the reliance of those historians who have attempted some kind of quantitative assessment on such a narrow range of sources may cast some doubt on their conclusions. In the case of Jeremy Burchardt's projection, the annals of the *Labourers' Friend Society* are undoubtedly a vital source of information with regard to allotments and their provision, but they are by no means exhaustive. The *Society* (originally the *Society for the Encouragement of Industry and Reduction of the Poor's Rates*) was founded in 1830 by Benjamin Wills, and was the most influential of a series of bodies which came into being specifically to campaign for the provision of land for labourers in the shape of small allotments, including the *Society for Bettering the Conditions and Increasing the Comforts of the Labouring Poor* established in 1796 by, among others, William Wilberforce. By 1835 the *Labourers' Friend Society* had a formidable list of patrons including "Their Most Excellent Majesties," twenty three peers, four bishops and five knights of the realm. Many of the great and the good residing (or at least landowning) in the south of England were members.[27] It was, in very much the sense that John Archer describes, a society of philanthropists intent on improving the moral, as well as the material condition of the labouring poor, and its influence was widespread. But it was not directly concerned with the provision of allotments *as a society*. Although many, if not most, of its patrons and members sought to do so themselves, the *Labourers' Friend Society* was in effect a campaign group committed to spreading the word of allotment provision. Its annals,

[27] The Labourers' Friend Society, *The Labourers' Friend: A Selection from the publication of the Labourers' Friend Society, showing the Utility and National Advantage of Allotting Land for Cottage Husbandry* (1835). For further details about the society, see J Burchardt, 'The Allotment Movement in

therefore, contain only anecdotal and incomplete accounts of exactly who provided land for allotments, how many labourers occupied them, and the conditions under which they were let.

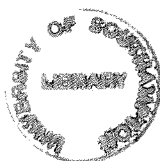
Similarly, the other main source for historians on the subject of allotment provision in the first half of the century is also flawed – the various select committees and parliamentary commissions on the poor laws, as well as others on agriculture, employment and, in 1843, on allotments themselves.[28] For one thing, they drew most of their witnesses from the ranks of converts to allotment provision, and often from the membership of the *Labourers' Friend Society* itself. Jeremy Burchardt points out that "the witnesses called to give evidence at the [1830-1 Poor Law] committee were often well-known advocates of allotment provision," and elsewhere he goes even further, suggesting that the Committee itself was packed with supporters of the *Agricultural Employment Institution*, in effect a branch of the *Labourers' Friend Society* that did advocate the buying of land to lease directly to labourers.[29] As a result, the information offered is unlikely to add greatly to what is already available through the archives of the *Labourers' Friend Society* and others like it. For another, it has already been noted that the attempt by the 1834 Commission to quantify allotment provision on a parish-by-parish basis is marred by the fact that only around 10% of parishes actually responded. However, none of these considerations adequately explains why historians of the allotment movement have been so keen to downplay them as a serious or influential social or historical phenomenon. In the work of both Barnett and Burchardt, for example, the general tenor is that in reality few labourers had access to allotments and that much more could have been done at a parliamentary level to compel parish authorities and others to provide them. Boaz Moselle agrees, suggesting that "'the market' failed to provide 'enough' allotments: a general plan for providing them...would have greatly enhanced the welfare of many of the rural poor".[30] Yet as we have seen, using even the very limited source of the 'Rural Queries' to the 1834 Commission Barnett is led to the conclusion that by the time the respondents completed their questionnaires (in the period 1832 to 1833) 42% of rural parishes in England as a whole were known to have some

England'.

[28] See most usefully the *Report from the House of Lords Select Committee on the State of the Poor Laws*, 1831; the *Report from the Select Committee on Agriculture*, 1833; the *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, 1834; and the *Report from the Select Committee on the Labouring Poor (Allotments of Land)*, 1843.

[29] Burchardt, 'Land, Labour and Politics', p.102; 'The Allotment Movement in England', p.74.

[30] Moselle, p.498.



allotment provision for their labourers. The question, then, is whether that 42% – notwithstanding that many of those parishes had very limited provision – is a socially or historically significant figure, or whether it represents a marginal one. And this, I would suggest, is a question which is open to a much greater degree of interpretation than it has so far enjoyed.

One factor openly acknowledged by Barnett is that many labourers already had access to gardens of their own. Using the same source he concludes that in the 909 southern parishes where details are given "gardens were possessed by all or most of the poor in 57% of the parishes covered; in 32% some had them, and in only 11% few or none".[31] Again, this is an imprecise exercise and there is clearly no way of knowing how large or how useful such gardens might have been. But even supposing that a moderate proportion of such gardens would have been large enough to have been economically useful, then the figure of 42% for allotment provision for those who did not have gardens, or whose gardens were of little use, begins to take on a rather different perspective. Another consideration is the uneven spread of allotment provision across the country as a whole. They were far more common in the southern agricultural districts than anywhere else, and to turn Barnett's argument back on himself again (so to speak), he acknowledges this directly in his article:

> They were most common in Wiltshire (where they were known in 82% of the parishes), Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire and Hampshire, and least common in the counties round London. Allotments were known in only 18% of the northern parishes (in Yorkshire 12%)...The Committee on Allotments spoke of the immense hostility to them in the northern manufacturing counties, which may account for their comparative rarity there.[32]

Taking these two factors together Barnett's figure of 42% of parishes which did have some allotment provision begins to look considerably more substantial. For if the figure of 42% of parishes represents England as a whole, whereas the figure for 'northern' parishes is actually only 18%, then allotment provision in England's southern agricultural parishes must necessarily have been much higher. And if, within such an upwardly adjusted figure, we take account of the fact that a significant proportion of labourers or cottagers would have enjoyed access to reasonably sized gardens, then again the number of labourers who would have needed to avail themselves of allotments would have been correspondingly lower. The number of otherwise landless southern agricultural labourers who benefited from allotments would, then, be much higher than Barnett seems to suggest.

[31] Barnett, p.171.

It is not my intention to provide an alternative quantitative assessment of allotment provision in the early 1830s, using either Barnett's limited sources or any others. My only objective is to highlight the apparent anomalies in those assessments that have so far been presented. The whole tenor of Barnett's pioneering article on allotments is that proportionately few agricultural labourers who would have benefited from allotments were able to secure them, and this is a thread which has been taken up by all those historians who have done limited work in this area after him. If this rough reinterpretation of the figures is even partially correct, though, then it would seem that allotments were far less marginal than has been suggested. The only way to prove this, of course, is by an exhaustive study – or possibly a series of parish-by-parish studies – of the available material; something which is well outside the scope of the present work. The question which exercises us here is *why* historians have tended to err on the side of caution when assessing the impact of allotments on rural society. In addressing this it is important to return the point made above, that there seems to have developed very quickly in the historiography of allotments a consensus which views them as marginal, not only in quantitative, but also in qualitative terms. Central to this consensus, I would suggest, is that those who have worked on allotments as a social phenomenon in the first decades of the nineteenth century have tended to focus far more on the allotment 'movement' than on the actual allotments – and, more importantly, the *occupiers* of those allotments – themselves. As we have seen, the strongest voices advocating plots of land for labourers were such as those that made up the *Society for the Encouragement of Industry and Reduction of the Poor's Rates* and the *Labourers' Friend Society*: indeed, in charting the history of allotments before 1850 it is hard not to be deafened by such voices, so pervasive are they in the available evidence. And we have also seen that these voices often hailed from grand country houses, from the palaces of bishops, and from the two Chambers of Parliament. Given the nature of these sources, it is perhaps understandable that the historiography of allotments has, up to now, taken the form it has.

One need only take a brief look at the *Labourers' Friend Magazine*, the official organ of the *Labourers' Friend Society*, to understand the case made by John Archer and others. Along with the magazine, short tracts were published under the title 'Useful Hints for the Labourer' on such topics as 'The Happiness of Domestic Service', 'Ill-Gotten Goods', 'Courtship and Marriage', 'A Little Talk About Savings Banks &c.' and '"Old

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[32] Barnett, pp.171-2

Rainy Day"' (an invocation against St. Monday).[33] Within the multitude of contemporary pamphlets published on the subject the message is often very similar: allotments were a moral as well as an economic benefit to the labourer; and at least as importantly, they were of economic, and therefore moral, benefit to the parish and to the country.

> The land let to the cottage land-worker is not to be considered as a mode merely of relief from paying a parish allowance to himself and family, but as land let to a tenant at a certain price, of which ground he may be deprived of idleness, bad example, want of punctuality in his payment...The prospect of paying a rent operates as a sort of moral super-intendance of the parties, and enforces activity and stimulates exertion.[34]

Here are clear echoes of what Archer sees as the attempt to reassert authority over the labourers through philanthropy; and here too are clear echoes of Keith Snell's interpretation of the debate over enclosure. "Contemporary views," he writes,

> were permeated with a confusion, to our minds, of moral rectitude with economic well being. To so many advocates of enclosure a change to wage dependency was equated with an improvement in 'moral' standing, in turn presented as tantamount to an improved standard of living.[35]

A comparison of the language of those who advocated allotments with that of those who favoured enclosure is, in fact, highly illuminating. For whereas

> it would seem that much contemporary opposition to open fields and commons stemmed not from any belief that these depressed the standard of living and increased parochial dependency and poor rates, but from opposition to the perceived independence and self-reliant resourcefulness which they conferred[36],

exactly the same rhetoric was used by those who favoured the contrary position of returning to labourers some limited access to land. In fact, it is clear that any and *all* schemes advocated by the structurally superior for the improvement of the labourer's lot necessarily involved the same morally charged rhetoric, be it enclosure, allotments, savings banks, the extension of educational opportunities, or rational recreations. It was, if you like, the intellectual currency of the time, and it could be argued that it stemmed as much from necessity as it did from the moral standpoint of the speaker. As in all public dialogue, a voice must conform to certain expectations in order to be heard, and the dialogue over allotments was no different. This is not to deny the very real convictions of many of those who spoke – as we have seen, the philanthropic credentials of many leading lights in the allotment 'movement' were faultless. But it is to question the apparent simplicity of the historical judgement that consigns the entire social and historical phenomenon of allotments to the dustbin of 'social control' merely because those who

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[33] *Labourers' Friend Magazine* (bound copies from 1837-39), Hartley Library, University of Southampton: Perkins per HD 1339.G7.
[34] Anon, *The Cottage Land Worker* (Bath, 1830), paragraph 6.
[35] Snell, p.169.

shouted loudest in its favour did so using a certain turn of language.

In fact a more sensitive engagement with some of the sources even within the allotment 'movement' itself shows that considerations other than those suggested by the rhetoric of moral improvement *were* at work. For example, one of the most celebrated advocates at the time was John Denson from Waterbeach near Cambridge, a figure far from the centre of the establishment. "I am *but* a labourer," he wrote,

> and make no pretension to the qualification of a writer; but, as my situation has been considerably improved my means of a small piece of land attached to my cottage, together with another small portion in the fields, I consider that I am able to give you some useful information on the subject. That the condition of the poor stands in need of amelioration, it is agreed, among all humane men in the country; but until you enable a poor man to benefit himself, you will be doing nothing to the purpose.[37]

Denson was in fact something more than just a labourer: having begun his adult life with a cottage and 30 poles of land, by the time of his writing he was an occupier of three acres with the ownership of two cottages. Nevertheless, earlier in life he had known the hardship and uncertainty of a labourer's lot, even falling to parish work on occasion in order to survive:

> I continued, though with difficulty, to support myself and family, except on one or two occasions, when, for a few days, I had to work at the gravel pits; and I can assure my readers that, setting aside the degrading necessity of it, it is not very pleasant to work at them, in cold weather, with a hungry belly, and a growling overseer to visit you.[38]

He began writing in favour of land for labourers in the early 1820s, publishing a series of letters on the subject, first in the *Cambridge Chronicle* and the *Quarterly Review*, and then in the *Labourers' Friend*. His message was clear and uncompromising, so much so that the editor of the *Labourers' Friend* felt it expedient to publish his seventh letter with his own cautionary preface:

> Our friend, J. Denson, it is evident, feels warmly, and has expressed himself forcibly...[W]e could have desired that some passages, apparently harsh, however unintended, had not escaped the pen, which, to do the greatest service, had better generally be unreproaching.[39]

What makes Denson's message most notable in this context is not so much his ardent advocacy of land for labourers as the manner in which he advocated it. His seventh letter is addressed to "the worthless of the great farmers," and begins:

> GENTLEMEN, - You will probably consider it presumption in me to give my opinion on the above important subject. I know my abilities are inadequate thereto; but as I also know I am addressing men, whose mental abilities are not much superior to my own, I feel

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[36] Snell, p.173.

[37] *The Labourers' Friend: A selection from the publications of The Labourer's Friend Society, showing the Utility and National Advantage of Allotting Land for Cottage Husbandry* (1835), pp.101-2.

[38] John Denson, *A Peasant's Voice to Landowners on the best means of Benefiting Agricultural Labourers and of Reducing the Poor's Rates* (London, 1830), p.iii.

[39] Editors introduction to J Denson, 'Letter VII' from the *Labourers' Friend*, June 1822, Vol. 2, p.94.

> emboldened to attempt it; the more so, as I find you are not quite so arrogant as you were a few years ago.

He continues in the same vein with, if anything, even less restraint:

> We, the labourers, have had a taste of agricultural distress, while you were, or might have been, making your fortunes – when you were selling your wheat from 14s. to £1 a bushel, and you could, and well, afford to pay us, then we were sent to the overseer to have our earnings made up a certain sum per head...Your avarice, your pride, your ignorance, and want of humanity, induced you, amongst other deprivations, to lock up your small beer cellars, at the same time not supplying their loss, by allowing them to earn sufficient to purchase a pint of ale...I dare say it never entered your shallow heads that this would be one of the causes of agricultural distress.[40]

Clearly Denson's message was not framed in the rhetoric of social control, and yet he was undoubtedly influential within the allotment movement. None other than Lord Braybrooke, Secretary of the Cottage Allotments Committee at Littlebury, Essex, cites his influence:

> In the autumn of 1829, my attention was directed to the subject of Cottage Allotments, by the perusal of a paper in the 41st volume of the *Quarterly Review*, "Upon the Condition of the English Labourer," and a pamphlet by John Denson of Waterbeach in Cambridgeshire, entitled, "The Peasant's Warning Voice to Landlords" [*sic*], which contains much useful information. I soon came to the conclusion that there could be no harm in trying the experiment.[41]

Overall, what Denson's message resembles more than anything else is that of a much more widely publicised rural dissident, William Cobbett. The two share many of the same preoccupations when it comes to their analysis of the labourer's lot, and as we have seen, Denson's rhetoric is often as uncompromising as Cobbett's. In the context of the present study, however, there is one crucial difference: Cobbett was in no way part of the 'movement' which advocated allotments, and it is true that within the heated atmosphere of 1830, when allotments began to enter the public debate as never before, he seemed highly sceptical. Commenting on the Bishop of Bath and Wells' recommendation of allotments, he declaimed in a voice heavy with irony:

> Admirable system, which, for forty years, has been moulding six farms into one, and has been *boasting* of those *enclosures* which have stripped the labourers of even the *goose pasture*; and which now (glorious system!) proposes to give the *labourers* little pieces of land![42]

And yet, within a year even this most uncompromising of critics appeared to have undergone a change of mind. Reporting on the actions of the Bishop of Winchester towards a Swing crowd, about which we heard earlier[43], he goes on to say that

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[40] Denson, 'Letter VII', pp.30-32.
[41] Quoted in Anon, Report of the Committee Appointed to Carry into Effect a Plan for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Poor at Saffron Walden in the County of Essex and some Account of the Cottage Allotments in the Adjoining Parish of Littlebury (London, 1830), pp.11-12.
[42] *Political Register*, 6th March 1830, p.305.
[43] See above, p.30.

> besides this really bishop-like conduct at Farnham, the Bishop has done another act, even more laudable than his charitable deeds at Farnham. It has been stated, in all the London newspapers, that he has ordered pieces of land, in WALTHAM CHASE, to be allotted to the labouring people round about.[44]

In fact, the reason Cobbett was so complimentary of the Bishop's scheme was that, with characteristic humility and reserve, he felt that its *true* originator was he himself:

> But, parsons, what will the Bloody Old *Times*, who *praises* the Bishop for his benevolence in this instance; what will this base and Bloody Old sheet say, when it is informed that I AM THE REAL AUTHOR OF THIS BENEVOLENT INVENTION!

Cobbett goes on to detail how, in 1816, he had proposed to the parish officials the allotment of small portions of waste land on Waltham Chase to needy labourers. Unfortunately, he was thwarted in Vestry by the efforts of three large farmers, Budd, Chiddle and Steel, so that in the end "every man voted against me, with the single exception of MR. JENNINGS, the schoolmaster!"[45] Clearly, Ian Dyck is right to suggest that Cobbett was "in two minds about the allotment movement," and that as a response to Swing "the allotment movement was too little too late, and wrongly motivated in the estimation of Cobbett".[46] But this is a very different proposition from suggesting that Cobbett was *anti*-allotments. In fact, as his efforts in Bishops Waltham in 1816 suggest, he did see allotments of land as positive measure which could be taken to ameliorate the lot of labourers, albeit as only a small part of a very much larger plan:

> [T]hough the allotment system is not what one could wish, it is hard to say what better plan could be contrived; and, at any rate, the gentlemen who promote it deserve great praise, because it is sure to do some good, and particularly, because it shows a desire on their part to do good to this description of persons.[47]

Here again, though, Cobbett's 'two minds' about allotments were very much in evidence. For only a few months earlier he had had this to say about the luminaries of the *Labourers' Friend Society*:

> It would appear that there are itinerant wanderers sent round by the crew who call themselves 'THE LABOURERS' FRIEND SOCIETY'; that is to say, a band of tax-eaters who wish to continue to eat taxes *in quiet*, and with that view, toss back the farthings upon the hundreds of pounds that they receive.[48]

Here again, we find clear echoes of modern commentators on the early-nineteenth century allotment movement such as John Archer. It was clearly the nature of those who constituted the 'movement', rather than allotments themselves, which caused Cobbett so much ambivalence and consternation. Allotments of land for labourers were, as he himself admitted, something to be applauded and encouraged, and, as we shall see, they

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[44] *Political Register*, 22nd January 1831, p.159.
[45] *Ibid.*, pp.158-9.
[46] Dyck, pp.185, 187.
[47] *Political Register*, 1st February 1834, p.271.

accorded very much with his vision of a partially independent agricultural working class. But, like so many modern historians he could never bring himself to describe them in unreservedly positive terms when they were promoted with such vigour by "a band of tax-eaters".

One final point to be made on the historiography of allotment provision in the first half of the nineteenth century relates to the support and opposition it enjoyed within parliament. Another very probable (though never explicit) reason for Cobbett's opposition to the allotment 'movement' was, as we have already hinted, that it was closely identified with the rationalisation of the poor laws. The first statutory response to the call for allotments for labourers occurred in 1819, when a subsidiary clause of Sturges Bourne's Select Vestries Act (59 George III cap. 12) allowed for parishes to take twenty acres of their own land, or alternatively to hire or purchase twenty acres from an alternative source, in order to provide employment for the poor. This could be done either by the parish directly employing the poor on such land, or by dividing the land into allotments to be let to them. However, the Act as a whole was "a major piece of legislation, whose primary aim was to increase the efficiency (and exclusivity) of parochial government".[49] It was Sturges Bourne's Act which, more than any other, began the nineteenth-century parliamentary 'rationalisation' of the system of poor relief which culminated in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. It was by this Act that parishes were first enabled to employ paid officials – Assistant Overseers – whose wages would be earned at least in part by savings made from the poor rates. And it was also this Act which altered the balance of power in vestry away from a form of rate payers' democracy and towards the monopoly of large farmers and landowners: where previously every rate payer in the parish had had an equal vote, the law was changed by Sturges Bourne's Act so that every parishioner rated over fifty pounds a year was now entitled to one extra vote for every twenty five pounds of additional rating up to a maximum of six votes. "Nothing," according to Cobbett, "was ever more unjust than this". Indeed, Cobbett reserved much of his fiercest rhetoric for this single Act, and even saw it as instrumental in bringing about the Swing risings themselves. At the height of the disturbances, he wrote:

> How often have I said, that the *new felony law*, the *new trespass law*, *Ellenborough's Act*, the *new poor-laws* of STURGES BOURNE, with their double ratings, select vestries, and 'assistant overseers', aided by the tread-mill: how often have I said, that these things, *all new*, all unknown, all unheard of, and undreamed of before George IV became Regent; how often have I said, and how often have my town readers been surprised at my saying,

[48] *Political Register*, 23rd November 1833, pp.478-9.
[49] Burchardt, 'Land, Labour and Politics', p.99.

> that, in the end, these thing would produce *the most dreadful consequences.*

Later, speaking of a proposed bill which would do away with many of the measures brought about by Sturges Bourne's Act (but which in the event failed to make it on to the statute book) he even goes so far as to suggest that

> this bill, as far as it relates to the immediate peace and quiet of the country; aye, and as far as it relates to the safety of the aristocratical order, is of much greater importance than the Reform Bill itself.[50]

It is clear, then, why Cobbett would have been against the 'system' of allotment provision insofar as it was framed within Parliament as a part of the hated rationalisation of the poor laws. Indeed, as we have already seen, it was this aspect of allotments – their tendency to ameliorate the situation of rate payers by enabling the poor to live at least partially independent of poor relief – that was central to their attraction for many if not most of the loudest voices in the 'movement', both in and out of Parliament. A correspondent to the *Labourers' Friend Society* notes appreciatively that in Long Newton, Wiltshire, where "every cottager was offered as much land as he and his family could manage," the "[p]oor's-rates [are now] reduced almost to nothing"; Thomas Lovell, pamphleteer, tellingly entitled his homily on the benefits of allotments, *Hints for Procuring Employment for the Labouring Poor; for the Better Managing Parish Concerns; and for Reducing the Rates*[51]; and the number of witnesses to the various parliamentary select committees that look in depth at allotment provision who state this as one of its major virtues is too numerous to mention in detail.[52] But time and time again Cobbett's antipathy to the allotment 'movement' came up against his knowledge that in practice it would be an almost unmitigated good for the labourers themselves: not a man noted for his ambivalence or lack of clear opinion, this dilemma once again flags up why he should have been "in two minds" on the issue of allotments. Cobbett was not alone in his ambivalence towards allotments for labourers, even among those who debated the subject from within parliament. Many Radicals, according to Jeremy Burchardt, looked on allotments at the beginning of the debate "with mild favour, or, at worst, indifference," and he points out that "Hunt and Attwood spoke in favour of Sadler's allotment Bill of 1832," which would have made it compulsory for those enclosing waste land to set aside a tenth of the land for poor allotments, but which, in the event, failed as a result of a lack of

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[50] *Political Register* 12th August 1826, p.391; 20th November 1830, p.738; 16th July 1831, p.165.
[51] H(ampshire) R(ecord) O(ffice) 92M95/F2/14/2: handbill entitled *Labourers' Friend Society, for disseminating information as to the means of bettering the condition of the labouring class*, July 1834.
[52] But see esp. *Report from the House of Lords Select Committee on the State of the Poor Laws*, 1831, 'Minutes of Evidence', pp.1-349; 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix B(1),

government support. However, he suggests that by the 1840s most Radicals vociferously opposed the allotment movement, which they had come to see as "another dishonest invention of the aristocracy to distract the attention of rural labourers from the iniquity of the Corn Laws" – by now, their reform of choice – "and to perpetuate a 'feudal' relationship with their labourers".[53] This again reinforces the view that many who had uncertain opinions about allotments during this most turbulent period of the debate did so, not as a result of the effect that allotments may have had on the lives of the labouring poor, but because of their deep antipathy to the way that the debate itself was being framed in the official (and unofficial) channels.

Earlier in this section, it was suggested that most historians who have treated the subject of early-nineteenth century allotment provision seriously have been hampered by the fact that they have tended to identify allotment *provision* with the rhetoric of the allotment '*movement*'. It has also become clear, though, that this is no more than a parallel of the way that many of those who could – perhaps should – have been its fiercest advocates at the time responded to the contemporary debate. It is more than possible – indeed, it is highly probable – that this has had the effect of hiding from view the history of those who stood to gain most by the introduction of allotments, the labourers themselves. The remainder of this chapter will concentrate on this hidden history, and will attempt to construct a conceptual framework within which it is possible to estimate how and *why* allotments would have been so important to the early-nineteenth century labouring poor.

iii) 'Land for Labourers': Allotments and the Rural Labouring Poor

> 'Times used to be better before Bedlow was enclosed...We should rejoice to occupy a rood of land, and pay full rent for it' (Buckinghamshire Labourers' Petition, 1834). '...small allotments of land to labourers to be cultivated with a spade...' (Essex Labourers' Petition, 1837). 'He wished every labouring man to have three or four acres of land at the same rent as the farmers gave. They would pay this, and gladly. (Loud cheers...)' (speech of Wiltshire labourer, 1845).[54]

Such direct testimony from labourers on their desire to occupy land is extremely rare: when we ask the question, 'How did labourers in the early-nineteenth century feel about allotments?', once again we come up against the familiar problem that "the voice of the

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pp.100-108; and *Report from the Select Committee on the Labouring Poor (Allotments of Land)*, 1843.
[53] Burchardt, 'Land, Labour and Politics', pp.120-1.
[54] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p.253.

poor themselves does not come to our ears".[55] These sentiments are revealing, but as direct quotes on the subject from labourers they are rare and possibly even unique. Unfortunately, the situation is made more difficult by the fact that E P Thompson, who quotes them and who was normally the most thorough and conscientious of historians, omits to give a clear provenance for them. Indirectly, however, much anecdotal evidence does exist which suggests how eager labourers were to 'occupy their rood of land', not least from the various parliamentary committees and commissions that dealt with the subject. For example, the Reverend Charles Wetherall of Byfield, Northants, was adamant that "the letting of land to the Poor is popular, both among the Poor and among the Nobility and Gentry and Clergy," so that "I am continually applied to by persons who have not land".[56] This was an experience shared by F Pickard of Stroud, who was "employed in looking after allotments": when asked how many applications he had for existing allotments, should they become vacant, he replied, "I can hardly walk the streets for the number of applications". We are faced with the problem, of course, that many witnesses such as these to the parliamentary committees and commissions were, as has already been suggested, known advocates of allotments. One of the most zealous of these was the Reverend Stephen Demainbray, of Broad Somerford in Wiltshire. Demainbray first gave evidence to the 1831 Lords' Committee on the Poor Laws, during which he told of his own scheme whereby, on the enclosure of the parish in 1806, he successfully petitioned for each cottage – twenty two in all – to have half an acre of land attached to it from the wastes. In addition, he made further provision for the labouring poor of the parish to occupy land in 1828: being a substantial landowner, the rector was able to influence one of his occupiers to cede back to him around 30 acres of land which he then let as allotments. Demainbray was under no illusions about his own position on the subject of allotments: asked whether or not he felt the poor benefited from the occupancy of small plots of land, he freely admitted, "I fear I shall appear an enthusiast on the subject". However, he went on to state that "I do most sincerely from my heart believe that they are extremely benefited," and in his evidence he illustrates time and again that the poor were "eager to take the land".[57]

Demainbray was not a member of the *Labourers' Friend Society*. In fact, he disagreed with them on one crucial point: the *Society* consistently advocated, both through

[55] J L and B Hammond, *The Village Labourer* (1927 edn.), p.243 (see above, p.46).
[56] 1831 *Select Committee on the Poor Laws*, pp.40, 45.
[57] 1831 *Select Committee on the Poor Laws*, pp.27, 28.

its official publications and through the testimony of its members, that a quarter of an acre was the maximum a labourer could 'safely' cultivate without encroaching on the time of his employer or overtaxing himself.[58] Demainbray, on the other hand, was happy to let allotments of land from ten rods (one-sixteenth of an acre) to two acres depending on the circumstances of the labourer. By the time of the 1843 Select Committee on the Labouring Poor, he was as zealous in his advocacy of allotments as ever, and he stuck to his guns with regard to the amount of land a labourer could cultivate:

> 199. What is the extent of each occupation?- In general half an acre, but when a man is advanced in life and his strength is not sufficient for a regular labourer, many on old man has his two acres, which he cultivates perfectly, and that keeps him off the parish; I have half a dozen cases of that description...
> 251. Do you think it advisable to make the allotments larger than is necessary for their own consumption, and to conduce to their own domestic comfort?- The system acts so beautifully, that I would not limit so very closely as the Labourers' Friend Society do.[59]

Despite not being a member of the *Labourers' Friend Society*, Stephen Demainbray was certainly a committed advocate of allotments for labourers, a large and benevolent landowner and a member of the allotment 'movement' in the broadest sense, and so perhaps we should be wary of taking his information on the subject of *labourers'* attitudes to, and eagerness for, allotments at face value. There are others, though, who were clearly not part of the 'movement' in the sense that we have described above who also testified to labourers' eagerness to occupy allotments.

John Brooks of Hinckley, Leicestershire, is a case in point. Brooks, a one-time stocking weaver, was "an inmate of the workhouse" when he decided with a "neighbour" to canvas local workers on their desire to occupy allotments:

> We...called a meeting of the working classes, and unfolded our views to them, and persons were proposed at the meeting for a deputation to go round to those persons who had property in land, to induce them to let it out to us.

Eventually, thirty-seven and a half acres of local land was procured from the dean and chapter of Westminster and Litchfield for the purpose and divided into portions of a rood (a quarter of an acre) each. A society was established for the management of the land which comprised partly of local working men and partly of "some gentlemen": "The clergyman of the parish, the curate, was the chairman; other gentlemen were appointed as the trustees, a treasurer, a secretary, so on".[60] Brooks also testified to the eagerness of local men for allotments, suggesting that one rood "is the whole each person is allowed to

[58] For example, according to the report of the 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor (Allotments of Land)*, first among the "RULES under which the system may be most advantageously carried on" is: "a quarter acre only, so as not to encroach on employed time" (p.iv).
[59] 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor*, pp.12, 14.
[60] 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor*, p.80.

have at the present; there are so many applicants at the present time that it would not do to allow more". In fact, he states that "there are upwards of 100 applicants, with no prospect of more land". This is perhaps all the more remarkable when one takes into account that each of these applicants paid a penny a week subscription to the local society without, as he says, any immediate prospect of gaining an allotment. The practice of subscribing a penny a week to a local allotment society in the hope of occupying a plot, even when there was no imminent likelihood of that society gaining any more land, was in fact widespread. James Orange, "Secretary and Travelling Agent" for the *Northern and Midland Counties Artisans' Labourers' Friend Society*, suggests that many members of the 63 local societies within his region were in the same position, and

> [a]s to the very poorest, I cannot speak to them further than to say, that I have always found that the very poorest have been the most anxious to obtain the land, and that they have brought the penny.[61]

But even this financial sacrifice is not so extraordinary when one considers the rents that labourers were prepared to pay for their allotments.

In a useful contribution to the economic history of allotments during this period, Boaz Moselle has, on the basis of responses to Question 20 of the 'Rural Queries' returned to the 1834 Poor Law Commission, estimated that the median yearly rent per acre paid by labourers for allotments was 40 shillings. Using a clutch of statistical sources, he concludes that this figure proves that "allotment holders typically paid higher rents than farmers for their land". Moselle's figures actually show that many allotment holders paid a yearly rent of *much more* than 40 shillings per acre: his median figure of 40 shillings is in fact based on the premise that very high rents (which for his purposes were those above 80 shillings an acre) should be discounted because they probably included services such as ploughing by the farmer. A rough break-down of his own tabulation gives us a total of around 67 parishes where rents paid were lower than 40 shillings, and 93 parishes where rents paid were more than 40 shillings. For the purposes of this study, however, it is merely important to note that the eagerness of labourers to occupy land meant they were prepared to pay something like double the rent for land that farmers paid at the time.[62] Elsewhere, testimony abounds of the even more extraordinary financial sacrifices labourers were prepared to make to occupy land where no clearly regulated system of allotments was available. Captain Scobell, yet another noted advocate of allotments, and one this time from *within* the ranks of the *Labourers' Friend Society*,

[61] 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor*, pp.81, 91.

suggested that within his experience, before allotments were available, "the rent [labourers in east Somerset] used to pay was 7l. or 8l. [per 50 or 60 poles] for a season for land not so good as they get now at 2l. by the year". Similarly, Sir George Strickland, bart., M.P., stated that "I have heard of 8l. an acre, in consequence of the great desire of labourers to take land at any value, even far beyond its worth," and he goes on to conclude that "in the end it turns out to be a great injury instead of a benefit".[63] Strickland's concerns are echoed by none other than William Cobbett. Cobbett's ambivalence towards allotments has already been noted, but the exploitation of labourers' desire for land by unscrupulous farmers seems to be yet another contributory factor. As early as 1826, when on a 'rural ride' between Devizes and Highworth, Cobbett noted disapprovingly that

> [a]s I came along the road for the first three or four miles, I saw great numbers of labourers either digging potatoes for their Sunday dinner, or coming home with them, or going out to dig them. The landowners, or occupiers, let small pieces of land to the labourers and these they then cultivate with the spade for their own use. They pay in all cases a high rent, and in most cases an enormous one.[64]

His disapproval is hardly surprising, for here are two of Cobbett's most cherished bugbears – money-grabbing farmers and potatoes – combined. But despite Cobbett's and others' objections to the way that some farmers took financial advantage of their labourers' desire to occupy land, the labourers themselves continued to do so under almost any conditions. We return for the last word to ex-stockinger John Brooks of Hinckley:

> I know one case where the allotment system was partially carried out, but the rent of the land was exorbitant; it was let at 7s., 8s. or 9s. a hundred; and then, after the individuals had got it into a good state, it was taken from them; the owner of the land took it into his own hands, put no manure upon it, laid out very small portion of labour upon it, and got all the virtue out of it, and then let it again; and such was the anxiety of the people to have a piece of land that individuals were always to be found to take it, although they well knew that when they had got the land into good order, it would be taken from them.[65]

On the evidence of the various select committees and commissions there is no doubt that across the country, wherever allotments were tried or proposed, even the very poorest labourers were prepared make considerable – and sometimes extraordinary – financial sacrifices in order to occupy them. The question remains, though, *why* were they so anxious? The most obvious answer is, of course, that over time considerable material gains could be made from spade husbandry on a small plot of land. Again, close scrutiny of the Parliamentary Papers throws up innumerable instances of tabulated gains to

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[62] Moselle, p.491.
[63] 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor*, pp.25, 47.
[64] William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, 'From Highworth to Cricklade and Thence to Malmsbury', 4th September 1826, pp.349-50.

labourers of allotment occupancy, examples of parishes where the poor rates dropped considerably when the allotments were introduced, and even first hand testimony by labourers themselves of the material gains that were to made from them. As early as the 1824, Thomas Smart, a labourer with seven children, told the *Select Committee on Labourers' Wages* that his garden ground of "a good bit under a rood" yielded an average of about 18 bushels – or 114 gallons – of potatoes annually; enough for his entire family's yearly needs. John Brooks suggested that even taking into account the relatively high rent of allotments the average financial profit of a rood of land was £5 a year, or 2 shillings a week. Of course, 2 shillings to a workman or labourer whose weekly wage was likely to have been between 8 and 10 shillings would have been of huge significance. Boaz Moselle, on the other hand, uses the figures of two witnesses to the 1834 Poor Law Commission which indicate that profits to the labourer were likely to have been considerably less – between £4 4 shillings and £4 12 shillings *per acre*. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between; but wherever it lies, the evidence points to a considerable profit (probably above a shilling per week) for the occupier of a quarter-acre allotment. It is, however, important to set this apparently clear material profit against two important considerations when calculating the financial benefits of allotments to labourers.

The first is that many labourers who occupied them would have been out of work and would therefore have been otherwise entirely dependent on parish relief. Indeed, even those labourers who could find work, particularly in the agricultural south of England, would, as a result of the widespread application of the 'scale' or 'Speenhamland' system, have had recourse to the parish for relief at some, if not most, times of the year. Occasionally, allotments were let to the labourer on the strict condition that he must not, while an occupier, apply for relief from the parish. No clear picture is available at the moment of just how common this stipulation was – or how strictly it was applied – but even in parishes which made such a condition there is some suggestion that labourers were still eager to take allotments when they became available.

> In the district of Devizes, at the chapelry of St. James, South Broom, the allotments of land which for many years past have been made to the labourers, have produced the best effects. A holder of a quarter of an acre is precluded from parish relief...They are in the most perfect state of spade cultivation, and are the market gardens of Devizes and the neighbouring populous towns.[66]

Overall, though, it does seem from the anecdotal evidence of the Parliamentary Papers that

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[65] 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor*, pp.86-7.

[66] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix A(1), 'Reports from Commissioners', pp.7-8.

this condition was rarely made – and indeed was unfeasible from the point of view of subsistence – on most occupiers of plots of a quarter of an acre. The Reverend Stephen Demainbray, from whom we heard earlier, seems to suggest in his evidence to the 1843 Select Committee that four times that amount of land was necessary to keep a labourer with a family from the parish:

> 269. Have you in your experience known of any man kept off the parish by having an allotment?- Decidedly. Many in my own parish; half of those holding the two acres must have been on the parish but for the allotment.[67]

Elsewhere, a man with seven children was anecdotally reported to have been able to feed his family entirely on the proceeds of half an acre of land and his own cottage garden (estimated to be "as large as this [Committee] room"), despite being unemployed, without recourse to the parish for relief[68]; but his case, even if accurately reported, is probably exceptional. The implication, then, is that many unemployed and underemployed labourers who occupied allotments of an average size (around a quarter of an acre) continued to rely on parish pay despite this occupation, albeit at a reduced rate. This brings into relief the question of just how economically useful allotments were for un- and underemployed labourers. Clearly, they could produce a considerable material profit to the labourer, but surely it must also be the case that if local parish officials, who would have been keenly aware of the circumstances of the individual claimants, were prepared to continue to pay relief to allotment holders then they must have considered them in *genuine need* of that relief.

This is a basic point, but one worth reinforcing. At a time of rising concern over parish rates, and particularly after the reforms of the parish relief system carried out by Sturges Bourne's 1819 *Select Vestry Act*, parish officials would have been increasingly conscious of any 'rationalisations' they could make to the payment of poor relief to labourers. And if, as appears to be the case from the evidence, many un- and underemployed labourers who cultivated average sized allotments continued to stand in need of financial relief from the parish, then we can draw one clear conclusion regarding these labourers and their plots of land: that they wished to cultivate that land in the full knowledge that doing so would not even provide them with a subsistence living and that they would continue to be dependent on a measure of poor relief. And this brings us to the second consideration, which is the sheer amount of work required to keep a quarter-acre allotment in good order, and therefore profitable. Clearly, for a working man the

[67] 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor*, p.15.

cultivation of a quarter of an acre was a considerable undertaking. As Boaz Moselle points out,

> [s]ince half an acre or less was too small an area to offer an employment alternative to wage labour, and since, when employed, wage labourers could contribute only a few hours to the allotment before or after work, an adult male could not run an allotment alone. In addition, where the allotment was let by the parish, the contract usually forbade Sunday working, thus reinforcing the bias against adult male labour. This suggests that a significant part of the work was performed by the rest of the family.

He goes on to reinforce this view, quoting at length from the 1834 *First Report of the Poor Law Commissioners*.[69] The opposition of many farmers to allotments is evident throughout the sources, and one consideration which recurs endlessly is "that if a labourer had more than a quarter of an acre, he is not a valuable servant, since he is apt to curtail the time which belongs to his master in order to attend his own land".[70] Again, reports abound of the labourer rising an hour or two early in the morning to attend to his land, and returning to it after work. In a different context, Alfred Williamson said, in his autobiographical account of the lives of railway workers, that "very often the village resident will work for an hour in his garden or attend to his pigs and domestic animals before leaving for the railway shed".[71] These were surely no small sacrifices of time and labour for the working man to make.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that the willingness of labourers to cultivate small plots of land surely cannot have been a matter of simple economics alone. It is likely that the material gains to un- and underemployed labourers would often have been marginal as they continued to be dependent on poor relief for the survival of themselves and their families. Allied to which the personal sacrifice to a working man of hard spade labour would have been considerable, despite the assistance of his family, and all the more so for a labourer who was in full employment: a man who worked ten hours a day for his employer and still found time to work an hour or two on his own plot of land must surely have considered the sacrifice very carefully indeed. There is clearly a need, then, to look *beyond* the narrowly economic and once again take a much more nuanced view of labourers attitudes to land and land occupation if we are truly to understand their attitude towards allotment provision in the early-nineteenth century.

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[68] 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor*, p.30.
[69] Moselle, p.487.
[70] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix A(1), pp.102-3.
[71] Ward & Crouch, p.23.

iv) 'The Cottage Well-Thatched With Straw': Allotments and the 'Cottage Charter'

Many contemporaries themselves sought to articulate some of these non-economic motivations, even within the highly rational debates of the parliamentary commissions and committees. Farmer Smith Woolley of South Collingham, Nottinghamshire, suggested that

> men of every class should have something to look forward to; hope of something better is the main spring of action in every rank; and there is naturally so much attachment to the land in the labouring class, that I know of nothing more likely to excite the feeling.

John Brooks agreed: when asked what effect the establishment of the allotment society had had on local labourers, he replied, "[i]t seemed to fill the people with hope".[72] Captain Scobell was less specific but perhaps even more eloquent when he said: "I would say [the labourers] would be glad to take any land, for land is like air; the men must have land; it is necessary to the rural labourer".[73] We find in Scobell's testimony on the benefits of allotments echoes of George Sturt on the loss of commons and wastes to the rural poor[74], something that was in turn reflected by Alexander Somerville (although from a very different perspective) in 1847:

> In my travels, wherever I find a common...I talk to the people living on and around it of the benefit they would derive from enclosure and careful cultivation; and in all cases they reply with a bitterness expressive of no milder belief that they think me an agent of some one about to robb them [*sic*], about to invade their little privileges, and despoil them of an independence which, even if not worth a penny, they would still cherish, merely because it was a soil there than the bare highway.[75]

Clearly, all of these commentators recognised that access to the land was something which was potentially of great economic value to the labourers. But equally clearly, they also pointed (though less precisely) to other motivations than the purely economic for labourers' desire for land. Most often, the search to articulate these motivations resulted in descriptions of the benefits of allotments for labourers being framed in the language of 'independence'. It has already been demonstrated that within the rhetoric of the allotment 'movement', 'independence' most often meant independence from the poor rates; how it became a cipher for the financial benefits of allotments to occupiers and landowners. Inevitably, given the nature of contemporary debate about land, agriculture and the fate of the labouring poor, the concept of 'independence' would always be inextricably linked

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[72] 1833 *Select Committee on Agriculture*, p576; 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor*, p.82..
[73] 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor*, p.397.
[74] See above, p.102.
[75] A Somerville, *A Whistler at the Plough* (London 1852), pp.101-2.

with the debate about rising poor rates. However, others who spoke of this 'independence' meant something far more complex than *merely* economic independence.

Alexander Somerville speaks of the 'independence' conferred on otherwise poor labourers by commons and wastes which "even if not worth a penny, they would still cherish"; Farmer Smith Woolley again agreed with the 1833 Commissioners that this independence had much to do with the "old English feeling":

> The old English feeling was a spirit of independence that made men feel it a degradation to accept parish relief?- Yes.
> That feeling is generally wearing away?- It is, I fear, entirely worn away in some districts, and in others is so fast waning, that, unless a strong and general effort be made to stop its progress nothing but ruin and misery can be anticipated.

Arthur Young, king poacher turned gamekeeper on the issue of labourers' access to land, suggested in 1801:

> Nothing can be clearer than the vast importance which all these poor people...attach to the object of possessing land, though no more than to set a cottage on...When we sit by our firesides and ask how a poor labourer can afford to build a comfortable cottage, enclose some land, break up and cultivate a rough waste, acquire some live stock, and get many conveniences about him, we defy calculation; for in such an inquiry we see nothing but impossibilities. But we forget a thousand animating principles of human feeling.[76]

In these "thousand animating principles", Young began to hint at the true value of land for rural labourers, that it was something which could not be calculated solely in terms of profit and loss. It conferred a precious independence on the rural labourer which was certainly in part – and a large part too – the independence from reliance on poor relief, and the independence of the small producer from total reliance on inadequate wages. But aside from these material considerations, the manner of the independence conferred by the occupancy or ownership of a little land was, as Captain Scobell and Arthur Young (among very many others) seem to suggest, of a very special kind. Its value was intrinsic in the land itself and in the altered status of the labourer who occupied it, and it most closely approximates to the historical independence of the English peasantry.

This independence was the central part of a much broader social agenda for the labouring poor, the social agenda of populism which was touched on at the end of Chapter 2. One of the clearest articulations of this social agenda is to be found, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the writings of William Cobbett. We have already described how Cobbett echoed the populism of the ballads and songs of the labouring poor in his condemnation of the "Bull-Frog farmers"; but like the ballads and songs, his populism was never expressed solely as a negative. Much as he condemned the engrossment of land and

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[76] 1833 *Select Committee on Agriculture*, p.571; A Young, *An Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor* (Bury St. Edmunds, 1801), p.11.

predicted the coming again of small farms, he also formulated a clear vision of how labourers could be freed from the yoke of agricultural proletarianization and could regain their cherished independence as small producers. His vision was practical, ranging from a well-known scheme to re-start ailing domestic economies by introducing bonnet-weaving using Rye grass, through a variety of agricultural innovations which he himself practised on his farms, and continuing in his advocacy of spade husbandry over the plough.[77] Ian Dyck has demonstrated how Cobbett's vision of cottage independence was shared in many respects by the Whig and Tory élite. However, he has also shown that they differed, crucially, in their estimation of how it could and should be brought about on a wide scale[78]. For the *Edinburgh Review*, which wrote admiringly of Cobbett's *Cottage Economy*, it was a question of morals; the labouring poor needed to be 'educated' out of their habits of dissolution and idleness.[79] For Cobbett, as for the labourers themselves, it was a structural problem:

> When 50 acres they did rent then money we did save,
> But now for to support their pride 500 they must have;
> But if each great farm was taken in and divided into ten,
> We might see happy days again among industrious men.[80]

Once again, we can see the way in which the populism of the labouring poor – a populism shared and articulated in large part by William Cobbett – itself shared many of the rhetorical characteristics of that other, older 'populism' which was integral to the paternalism of the eighteenth century. Crucial to both was the vision of a once independent peasantry, hardy, moral and hardworking; and equally crucial was a deep sense of loss at its passing. However, we must also note the way in which these two versions of populism differed in their analysis of the shift in social relations which was central to the demise of this way of life.

In actual fact, Cobbett disliked intensely the widespread use of the term 'peasantry' to describe agricultural labourers. Ian Dyck suggests that this was simply "on account of its implication of a 'degraded caste of persons'," but when we look again at Cobbett's work a far more complex reason for his dislike of the term is indicated. The word 'peasant' was, he suggested,

> a French word, which in its literal sense, means *Country Folks*. But, in the sense in which it is used in France and Flanders and Germany, it means, not only country people, or

[77] See especially *Political Register*, 29th September 1821, pp.751-9; 31st May 1823, pp.513-525; 29th December 1827, pp.849-864; and William Cobbett, *Cottage Economy* (first published 1822: Oxford University Press edn., 1979).
[78] Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, Chapter 5; Dyck, 'Cottage Economy'.
[79] 'Cottage Economy', *The Edinburgh Review*, v.38(75) (February 1823), p.105.
[80] 'Swaggering Farmers', see Appendix.

> country folks, but also a *distinct and degraded class of persons* who have no pretentions [*sic*] whatever to look upon themselves, in any sense, as belonging to the same society, or *community*, as the Gentry: but who ought always to be '*kept down to their proper place*'. And, it has become, of late, the fashion to consider the Labouring Classes in England in the same light, and to speak of them accordingly which was never the case in any former age.

Cobbett here exhibits an acute awareness of the importance of language: it was in the *use* of the word peasant, rather than in what he suggests was its literal meaning, that it had become debased and degraded. Those of his contemporaries who used the word to describe the English labourer were, he suggested,

> blinded by their foolish pride; that pride, which has nothing of mind belonging to it, and which, accompanied with a consciousness of a want of any natural superiority over the Labouring Classes, seeks to indulge itself in a species of vindictive power. There has come into the heads of these people, I cannot very well tell how, a notion that it is proper to consider the Labouring Classes as a *distinct cast* [*sic*]. They are called, now-a-days, by these gentlemen, 'the Peasantry'.

Here again we see Cobbett's rural populism in action. It was clear in Chapter 2 that this populism laid the blame for the disintegration of rural relations squarely at the door of 'new fashioned' farmers who, by their pride and avarice, had withdrawn from the 'common table' and had elevated themselves beyond their 'natural' place in the legitimate economic hierarchy of the countryside. Now we can begin to see in Cobbett's rhetoric an articulation of the fundamental social vision of this populism: the relationship between farmers and labourers within the value system of rural populism is clearly that of *social equals*. Certainly, the life experiences of farmers and labourers were in many ways quite different, and within populism as we have seen there must necessarily exist an economic hierarchy. Cobbett himself explicitly acknowledges this when he says that

> the far greater part of the labourers must, of necessity, be only just able to obtain a sufficiency of food and raiment, in the days of their health and vigour. This must of necessity be the case: of absolute necessity, mind; for otherwise, the necessary labour would not be performed.[81]

Despite this economic hierarchy, however, he is also clear that that those who perform this necessary labour are *at least* the social equals of their economic superiors within the transcendent moral code of populism. According to Cobbett those among large farmers and the squirearchy who consider the labourers to be their social inferiors believe that they have no right "to look upon themselves, in any sense, as belonging to the same society, or *community*, as the Gentry"; whereas in reality it is these 'gentlemen' who are "blinded by their foolish pride; that pride, which has nothing of mind belonging to it, and which [is] accompanied with a consciousness of a want of any natural superiority over the Labouring Classes".

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[81] *Political Register*, undated (1817), vol.32, no.14, pp.5-6; 14th August 1824, p.399.

Crucial to Cobbett's vision of social value is the centrality of labour: throughout his work he articulates a clear and unambiguous labour theory of social value that elevates manual labour above all other virtues. It is, of course, reflected in passages where he pillories 'new fashioned' farmers for their withdrawal from the plough and for their 'idleness' and 'opulence'. It is again reflected when he speaks directly to the "'WEAVER BOYS OF LANCASHIRE" –

> These vain persons [the 'Gentlefolk of Manchester'] seem still to entertain the hope that they are to go on to the end, treating as the scum of the earth those to whose labour and talent they owe their wealth and all that they possess above the common labourer –

and yet again when he bemoans those farmers who "never complain of any burden but the poor":

> They complain of nobody but those who make to come all the food, all the drink, all the raiment, all that covers us by day or shelters us by night; these are the only persons, these persons by whose labour alone they profit; these are the only persons to whom they grudge to give a portion of their money.

But his labour theory could be even more explicit when he praised those who did the work directly, and for Cobbett none was worthy of such high praise, none was of higher social value, than those who performed *rural* labour. Rural labour at one and the same time conferred the highest virtue and was the greatest teacher:

> If the cultivators of land be not, generally speaking, the most virtuous and most happy of mankind, there must be something at work in the community to counteract the operations of nature. This way of life gives the best security for health and strength of body. It does not teach, it necessarily produces, *early rising*; constant *forethought*; constant *attention*; and constant *care of dumb animals*.

Husbandry and the cultivation of the land were the most worthy forms of human activity, and under the right circumstances they tended towards the only truly contented life:

> The farmer's cares are pleasing cares. His misfortunes can seldom be more than lessons. His produce consists of things wanted by all mankind. His market is a ready-made one. No day-books, bills, and ledgers haunt his mind. Envy, that accursed passion, can, in a natural state of things, find no place in his breast; for, the seasons and the weather are the same to all; and the demand for his produce has no other measure than the extent of his crops.[82]

For Cobbett, in a "natural state of things" there simply is no social distinction between the labourer and the farmer, for when rural society operates as it should, and despite the legitimate economic hierarchy, farmer and labourer are indistinguishable in their husbandry, in their tillage of the land, and in their rural labour.

The labour theory espoused by Cobbett was one that was also clearly visible in the popular culture of the labouring poor. Often (just as with Cobbett's addresses to the 'weaver boys' and to complaining farmers) it took the form of a paean to those who

[82] *Political Register*, 25th January 1817, p.99; 14th July 1832, p.74; 11th March 1821, pp.732-2.

performed all kinds of manual labour, such as in 'The Loom and the Lathe':

> Then hurrah! for the loom and the lathe,
> Hurrah! for the spade the plough,
> The happiest man I have met with is he,
> Who lives by the sweat of his brow.

Here again, in songs like 'The Loom and the Lathe', it is labour which confers the greatest happiness and contentment; but it is important to note as well that it is only by one's *own* labour that true independence can be found:

> Happy is he on himself who depends,
> If he has but contentment and health,
> For industry more to his happiness tends,
> Than either position or wealth.
> I envy not those who great riches have got,
> For wealth is often a ban,
> But he has the best and the happiest lot,
> Who works-acts-and speaks as a man.[83]

Sometimes, as in 'The Faithful Plough', we find a mirror to Cobbett's veneration specifically of rural labour:

> Samson was a strong man, and Solomon was wise,
> Alexander for to conquer was all that we do prize;
> King David was a valiant man, and many a thousand slew,
> Yet none of these great heroes could live without the plough
>
> I hope that those who hear this will hold to what is true,
> For we cannot sail the ocean wide without the faithful plough;
> For they must have their beer and biscuits, plum puddings, flour and peas,
> For to feed the jolly sailors that plough the raging sees.
>
> I hope there's none offended, now, with me for singing this,
> For it never was intended to be anything amiss;
> If you consider it rightly, you'll find that it is true,
> For all the trades I've mentioned depend upon the plough.[84]

There is a very real sense in all of these songs, just as there is in Cobbett's rhetoric, that hard labour is the *only* legitimate activity for a man; that despite their economic differences, none can match the social value of the labouring man:

> Give me the spade and the man that can use it,
> A fig for the lord with his soft silken hand...[85]

And yet it becomes obvious that this 'natural' state of affairs has been subverted by the pride and avarice of the structurally superior so that, in the words of 'Labouring Man':

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[83] 'The Loom and the Lathe', see Appendix. See also, for example, 'Contentment, or the Happy Workman's Song' and 'Labouring Man', Manchester Central Reference Library: BR Q398.8 S9 v.2 & 4; 'The Labourer's Worthy of His Hire', Bodleian Library, Oxford: Firth c.22(109); and 'Prop of the Land' in A Williams, *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames* (London, 1923), p.105.

[84] 'The Faithful Plough', see Appendix.

[85] 'The Spade!', see Appendix.

From day to day you all may see
The poor are frown'd on by degrees
By them you know who never can,
Do without the labouring man.

Again, in the populism of the ballads and songs of the labouring poor we see at work a broad conception of social relations that is clearly analogous to Cobbett's. The working man[86] is the source of all wealth; his is the truly lived life, the life of greatest social value. And yet, like the 'peasants' in Cobbett's declamatory passage above, rather than being feted for their labour and their social importance, they are starved and demeaned, and treated at every turn as inferiors:

The labouring man will plough the deep,
Till the ground and sow the wheat,
Fight the battles when afar,
Fear no dangers or a scar,
But still they're looked upon like thieves,
But them they keep at home at ease,
And every day throughout the land,
They try to starve the labouring man.[87]

It may seem a long road that takes us from a consideration of the value of allotments and land to the rural labouring poor to one of the populist theory of the social value of labour, but in reality it is surprisingly short. For we have seen how, in Cobbett's rhetoric no less than in the ballads and songs, labour is conceived of as the foundation of all wealth, the only true path to happiness, and the greatest source of social value. We have seen how the labourer should, "in a natural state of things" (to use Cobbett's phrase), be regarded as *at least* the social equal of "them they keep at home at ease". But we have also seen how, by the early years of the nineteenth century, they were "looked upon like thieves"; how labourers were now called 'peasants' and were treated with contempt, as "a distinct cast". Within the terms of rural populism – the populism articulated by the rural protest ballads and by William Cobbett – this situation had arisen directly as a result of changes in the pattern of land ownership, tenure and access. It became clear in Chapter 2 how the labourers identified directly the engrossment of land by large farmers, and their subsequent withdrawal from the social compact of the countryside, as fundamentally problematic for them; how the rural protest ballads called for farms to be broken up; and we saw in Chapter 1 how, in 1830, the labourers compelled the farmers once again to return to the social compact, symbolically at least. Clearly, though, calls for farmers to

[86] The male pronoun is used advisedly in this context; it is men's labour which is conceived of in the populism of the labouring poor as the source of all happiness and wealth. Women clearly have their place, but it is some way behind men and behind closed doors.
[87] 'Labouring Man', see Appendix.

break up their farms and the enforced, if symbolic, restoration of the social compact during the brief period of Swing were never going to be enough on their own to restore the agricultural labourer to his rightful place at the centre of rural society. This could only be achieved by one thing: the getting of a little land of his own. It was the success of rural proletarianization, the absolute ascendancy of the wage relationship, which more than anything had robbed the agricultural labourer of his status as a social equal within the economic hierarchy of populism; it was this that had made him the farmer's 'slave' and had taken away any possibility of independence. The process was begun by the engrossment of farms and was consolidated by the loss of wastes and commons and the customary perquisites that the labouring poor took from them; it was all but completed by the withdrawal of farmers from the social compact and their treatment of the labourers as "a distinct cast", different from and inferior to themselves. Only by the occupation of a little land (and it is that it was only a little land that labourers looked for) could the social gulf between wealthy farmers and the labourers, their 'wage-slaves', be bridged. For the rural labourer access to land which was theirs by right was, as it always had been, a fundamental requirement: it was this that made the difference between a freeman and a slave. As Captain Scobell told the 1843 Select Committee on Allotments, "land is like air; the men must have land; it is necessary to the rural labourer".[88] And so once again we come to the populist social model; a model in which rural labourers were entitled to a degree of cottage independence, and in which, as the social equal of the farmer and the squire whose economic superiority was contingent on their sweated labour, they *must have* that independence.

William Cobbett was acutely aware that the bridging of that gulf – the gulf between the occupier, no matter how small, and the wage slave – was fundamental to the survival of the social compact in the countryside:

> I shall be told, perhaps, that many *large farmers* treat their labourers very kindly, even take care to see, that they are supplied with a sufficiency of *food* and *raiment*. I believe this...But, Sir, the Jamaica farmer does the same by his slaves. From a different motive, perhaps, but he *does* it. This renders slavery less cruel, but still, a state of life which contains a *compulsion* to *work* without a moral *possibility* of saving something for old age, is slavery, call it by what name you will; and, one of the consequences of such a state of things, is that *a large standing army is required in time of profound peace*. The *social tie* being broken; the tie of *content* being no longer in existence, its place must be supplied by *force*.

Of course, it could be argued that the same ends would have been served simply by an increase in labourers' wages. But Cobbett also knew that the "social tie", the "tie of

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88 See above, p.128.

content" between labourers and farmers, could only be maintained if the former occupied their rightful place in the rural economic hierarchy:

> If [the labourer] must labour for others, upon a bare enough to sustain life, then he *must*; but, to expect him to do this *cheerfully* is to scoff at reason and nature. No: every man that works on the *land* desires *some* land to till *for himself*; and that community is the most happy where the land is in the greatest number of hands.[89]

This was a sentiment that was echoed by others too: as we noted in Chapter 2, the Commissioner for Saffron Walden pointed to the fact that

> since the abolition of small farms, it has been observed, that there is nothing between 10s. a week and a large occupation: and a familiar metaphor has been used, that all the intermediate staves in the ladder have been removed.[90]

In the rural ballads and songs of the early nineteenth century, however, it is possible to identify a social model whereby labourers would once again occupy their position as the "intermediate staves" in the rural ladder, and would be rewarded for their role as the 'Prop of the Land' with the cottage independence of their forefathers. This model can be identified in the songs' 'demotic utopianism' and in their use of precedent and the historical sense: it is part and parcel of what others have characterised as the 'golden age myth'.[91] At its simplest, we can see it in operation in the most apparently nostalgic and pastoral of the ballads, such as 'The Cottage well-thatched with Straw':

> In the days of yore there sat at his door
> An old farmer, and thus said he,
> With his pipe and his glass, 'I wish that half
> The world was as happy as me:
> I envy not the rich nor the great,
> Nor the proudest I ever saw
> While I have home-brewed, brown bread,
> And a cottage well-thatched with straw'.
>
> 'My father he built this snug little cot,
> He got it I'll tell you how,
> 'Twas the sweetest money that ever was got,
> For twas earned with the sweat of his brow:
> 'Now', says my old dad, 'take care, my lad,
> To keep out o' the squire's claw,
> While you have home-brewed, brown bread,
> And a cottage well-thatched with straw.[92]

All the essential ingredients of the rural populist social vision are here: the independence, both from the "squire's claw" and from absolute reliance on the wage; the simple but comfortable lifestyle of the small producer; and even the labour theory, which elevates these simple pleasures to "the sweetest money that ever was got, for twas earned with the

[89] *Political Register*, 26th May 1821, pp.531-2; 11th March 1821, p.754.
[90] See above, p.96.
[91] See above, p.52.
[92] 'The Cottage well-thatched with Straw', see Appendix.

sweat of his brow". But there is one final ingredient here that we have so far touched on only tangentially, and that is what we might call the 'culture of sufficiency'.

In Chapter 2, it was noted that the populist vision of social relations was in no way a levelling one; that the farmer was as entitled to his profits as the labourer was to a certain kind of consideration. It was also observed how Cobbett echoed this vision when he explicitly acknowledged the necessity of a legitimate economic hierarchy in the countryside.[93] What has not been alluded to, at least not explicitly, is the fact that this populism is founded upon the principle of sufficiency. We have already seen how 'new fashioned' farmers were lambasted for their pride and their avarice; for the accumulation – both in terms of land and luxury – of more than they could pay for by 'the sweat of their brow'. Here, in 'The Cottage well-thatched with Straw', we can see the other side of this coin: the labourer, the source of all wealth in the countryside, wants nothing more than the minimum that would give him contentment. All he asks is to be able to provide for himself and his family "home-brewed, brown bread, and a cottage well-thatched with straw": he envies not "the rich nor the great, nor the proudest I ever saw". Again and again, we can see this 'culture of sufficiency' at work in the ballads and songs:

> By reaping and mowing,
> By ploughing and sowing,
> Dull Nature supplies me plenty;
> I've a plentiful board,
> And a cellar well stor'd,
> And my garden supplies every dainty...
> -----
> Let the mighty and great
> Roll in splendour and state,
> As I envy no mortal, I swear it;
> For I eat my own ham,
> My own chicken, and lamb,
> And I shear my own sheep and I wear it.[94]

By his independence and hard work, 'The Farmer' is freed from the cares of poverty; by embracing the 'culture of sufficiency' he is also freed from the cares of wealth. He is happy, *but he is also content.* According to the values of populism it is this contentment, rather than great riches or even an increased share of the spoils of agriculture, to which the labourer is also entitled:

> I am a poor Workman you'll easily grant,
> And I'm rich as a Jew, for there's nothing I want,
> I have Meat, Drink and Cloaths and am hearty & cant,
> Which No-body can deny, &c.

[93] See above, pp.61, 131.
[94] 'The Farmer', see Appendix.

I live in a Cottage and yonder it stands,
But while I can work with these two honest Hands,
I'm happy as those that have Houses and Lands,
Which No-body can deny, &c.

I envy not them that have thousands of Pounds,
That sport o'er the Country with Horses and Hounds,
There's nought but Contentment can keep within bounds
Which No-body can deny, &c.[95]

In many ways, this 'culture of sufficiency' was the mainspring of the labourers' social agenda. It was at the heart of the critique of 'new fashioned' farmer with his pride, luxury and avarice; it was central to their understanding of the breaking of the social compact, the loss of the "intermediate staves" in rural society; and it was crucial to the social model of the labourers which demanded recognition within the rural economy and limited independence from an inadequate wage. The concept of sufficiency is, of course, a double-edged sword: when applied to the rich it is a condemnation of their greed; when applied to poor, however, it can be a powerful condemnation of their treatment. And there is yet another vital component of the 'culture of sufficiency' as it was applied within the value system of rural populism; sufficiency, that sufficiency which gave rise to contentment, was also expressed in terms of limited *self*-sufficiency. We have seen how the ballads and songs, through their 'demotic utopianism' and the application of the historical sense, advanced a model of rural society whereby the labourer was able to provide himself and his family with "home-brewed, brown bread, and a cottage well-thatched with straw". This is, of course, only another way of expressing that cottage independence which the working man craved, and which for the rural labourer was in part conferred by access to a little land. It is a cottage independence that was eloquently described in a very different context by Assistant Commissioner Muggeridge in his report to the Parliamentary Commission on Handloom Weaving in 1840:

> the weaver will stand by his loom while it enable him to exist, however miserably...[for] it gratifies that innate love of independence which all more of less feel, by leaving the workman entirely the master of his own time, and the sole guide of his actions.[96]

William Cobbett did all he could to encourage and enable rural labourers to become at least partially self-sufficient, not only through his polemical journalism but also through his work on *Cottage Economy*. In the Introduction, he wrote:

> To live well, to enjoy all things that make life pleasant, is the right of every man who constantly uses his strength judiciously and lawfully. It is to blaspheme God to suppose

[95] 'Contentment: or the Happy Work-Man's Song', see Appendix.
[96] 1840 *Report from Assistant Commissioners, Handloom Weaving (North of England)*, p.601.

that he created men to be miserable, to hunger, thirst, and perish with cold, in the midst of that abundance which is the fruit of their own labour. instead, therefore, of applauding "happy poverty", which applause is so much the fashion of the present day, I despise the man that is poor and contented; for such content is a certain proof of a base disposition, a disposition which is the enemy of all industry, all exertion, all love of independence.

We saw earlier how Cobbett clearly subscribed to the rural populist principle of a legitimate economic hierarchy, and in the Introduction to *Cottage Economy* he again affirms that "it is necessary to the very existence of a people, that nine out of ten should live wholly by the sweat of their brow". But here he goes on: "is it not degrading to human nature, that all the nine-tenths should be called poor; and, what is still worse, call themselves poor, and be contented in that degraded state?"[97] For Cobbett, as for the labourers themselves, sufficiency was something very different to a state of poverty. In their labour and their "two honest Hands" they had all the tools they needed to provide an adequate living for themselves and their families: all they wanted were the structural conditions – including the provision of a little land – that would enable them to use these tools to their best advantage. In the case of eighteenth and early-nineteenth century commoners, Jeanette Neeson has shown how contemporaries – "modernizers" – failed to understand precisely the "relationship between [their] means and their wants":

Commoners had little but they also wanted less. The result may have been that they lived well enough for themselves, but invisibly and poorly in the eyes of outsiders.[98]

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for agricultural labourers in the early-nineteenth century. In the rhetoric of those who opposed the widespread provision of land for labourers it becomes clear that they understood only too well the relationship between labourers' 'means and their wants': they wanted little, little enough for subsistence in fact; but in the event they were allowed even less.

It is notable that farmers and others who objected to the widespread provision of allotments did so precisely because of the limited 'independence' it would give the labourers:

With regard to the farmers, do not you think that the reason they object to it is this, that it makes the labourers independent of them, and that they are not so easy to control?- I think that is one reason.[99]

Jeremy Burchardt has shown how, on the subject of allotment provision, "the social divide was between large farmers on the one hand, and the labourers and small farmers on the other," and he goes on to say that "the reason that farmers most often gave for their opposition to allotments was that allotments would weaken their bargaining position *vis-à-*

[97] William Cobbett, *Cottage Economy*, pp.2-3.
[98] Jeanette Neeson, *Commoners*, p.41.

vis the labourers". This is certainly borne out by the 1834 Poor Law Commissioners:

> Any objection to the practice [of furnishing small allotments of land to labourers] rests almost altogether with the farmers; and...their one real objection, though others are propounded, is in two ways – it will give them a better position with respect to the terms of employment, and detract also in great degree from the quality of labour on the market.

However, Burchardt goes on to say that

> what farmers seem to have resented most of all about allotments is that they blurred the distinction. We need to remember that allotments were larger than now, occasionally ranging up to an acre or even more; that social status was to a considerable extent defined by one's relationship with the land; and that the early nineteenth century agricultural labourer occupied the lowest social rung of any non-criminal occupational group.[100]

This, then, was the real battle in the countryside in the early nineteenth century, the battle between labourers' who demanded that they be treated as the social equals of their economic superiors and that their role as the source of all agricultural wealth be recognised, and farmers who refused to do so. They asked for little enough, the provision of a little land and the potential to elevate themselves beyond the state of absolute wage-slavery. It was, after all, "necessary to the agricultural labourer"; it was their birthright. On the Duke of Northumberland's estate, cottages were let with about half an acre of land attached. On the death of the tenants of these cottages,

> great competition then ensues for the favour of being allowed to hold them; this will not appear surprising, taking into account the degree of independence (seeming at least) conferred by these allotments, in comparison with the farmer's hind, who is bound to find his bondager, and is liable to be turned out at the close of his year's service.[101]

The battle lines become even clearer when we look at the language of those objected to allotments. We saw earlier how William Cobbett's attempt to furnish allotments for unemployed labourers at Waltham Chase in 1816 was thwarted in vestry by the prejudices of three large farmers.[102] One of the main reasons they gave for their objections was that land would make the labourers "Sacy", or saucy. Jeremy Burchardt indicates the way in which large farmers would taunt labourers who had their small allotments with cries of 'Johnny farmer', and John Archer further points to this tendency, quoting Thomas Campbell Foster who wrote in *The Times* in 1844 of the farmers' "absurd jealousy" of the allottees, the way they mocked the labourers with cries of "Well, John Farmer, how does your corn look?"[103]

For both farmers and labourers in the first third of the nineteenth century the issue of

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[99] G W Gent in evidence to the 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor*, p.39.
[100] Burchardt, 'Social Relations', pp.171, 174; 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix A(1), p.260.
[101] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix A(1), evidence of John Wilson, p.125.
[102] See above, p.117.
[103] *Two-Penny Trash*, Vol. No.4 p.88; Jeremy Burchardt, 'Rural Social relations', p.174; John Archer,

allotments was far more complex than a purely economic reading allows. Certainly, farmers had their own economic interests at heart when they objected to the "supposed diminution of their profits by introducing a new class of producers".[104] And for the labourers too, material considerations were inevitably and centrally linked with their desire for land: we have seen above how the produce of a small allotment would considerably supplement the cottage economy. But the real issue was one of independence: independence from the wage and from poor relief, but most of all the independence of the small producer. The process of modernization in agriculture which had gained pace since the early-eighteenth century had resulted not only in the economic impoverishment of agricultural labourers, it had also (and inevitably) resulted in their psychological and social impoverishment too. Farmers were the absolute winners in this process: to them came not only the profits, but also the parlours, the port and the piano-fortes – in other words, the status of 'gentlemen'. Labourers were the absolute losers. Not only were they impoverished materially but they were shut out of the rural social process becoming mere 'hinds', slaves to be hired, fired and treated entirely at the caprice of the farmers. More than this, they were shut out too from the commons and wastes, the open fields and common lanes of their mental and material landscape: they lost their birthright, access to the land. It is hardly surprising, then, that 'new fashioned' farmers were anxious to keep their labourers in subjection to them entirely, to block any concession which tended even to the most limited independence. But as we have seen, the provision of allotments, and hence the possibility at least of a degree of cottage independence, did gain ground significantly in the early nineteenth century, and particularly after the disturbances of 1830. As 'labourer' John Denson told "gentlemen" farmers in 1822:

> If there be one scourge greater than another, the greatest that can afflict an agricultural nation, is the occupation of the soil by few persons! for such occupation produces pride, luxury, avarice, and cruelty, on the one hand, and as their consequences, poverty, wretchedness and immorality on the other. The nation, soon become 'To hastn'ing ills a prey', and sooner or later submits to that oblivious devastation which must invariably attend the destruction of that grand system which binds man to man...Gentlemen, you must 'let live' as well as 'live'. The population of our villages must have profitable employment, and they must have land to cultivate. You *know the value* of *land to them*.[105]

After the labourers themselves made themselves heard in 1830, the farmers it seems had little choice but to sit up and take notice.

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pp.34-5.

[104] 1834 *Report from the Commissioners on the Poor Laws*, Appendix A(1), p.125.

[105] John Denson, 'Letter VII', *Labourers' Friend*, v.2 (June 1822), pp.40-42.

CONCLUSION

At the very beginning of this thesis, in the introduction, I suggested that unlike many subsequent historians, contemporaries were fully aware of the symbolic resonance of the swing disturbances. From new Home Secretary Lord Melbourne, who made clear his disapproval of the symbolism of Magisterial concessions, to the leader writers of *The Times* and the *Morning Chronicle* who saw in the burnings and mobbings the machinations of Free Irishmen, Cobbetite Radicals and French revolutionaries, no-one who watched them could be blind to the rich drama of the events of 1830. What has emerged throughout the progress of this study, however, is that it was not only, nor even primarily, the structurally superior – commentators, politicians and administrators – who saw that symbolic resonance and the high drama of crowd action and arson. Crucially, those who made up those crowds, who fired the stacks and barns of farmers, were themselves fully aware, and self-consciously so, of the messages their actions carried both within the parish bounds and further afield. Unlike the cold facts of the various 'crimes' reported by Special Commissions and in the national press, the 'body language' of the Swing crowds spoke far more eloquently of that drama and its symbolic meanings. The crowd took from its customary consciousness the protocols it needed to conduct itself legitimately during the peculiar conditions of Swing; it assigned clear roles to individuals – symbolic leader or negotiator, Captain or Lord, money-taker or treasurer – and it prescribed certain norms of behaviour clearly rooted in that consciousness for individuals and for the crowd as a whole. But more than that, it required of its 'victims' that they too should behave according to those norms, assigning to them parts in the drama that were every bit as defined as those acted out by the crowd itself. The farmer from whom a financial 'contribution' was demanded was to give it freely (if not willingly) thereby placing himself at the service of the crowd, accepting, symbolically at least, its pre-eminence in this particular social drama. If required, he was to provide food and drink, extending his hospitality to his neighbours as equals and (again, at least symbolically) as friends. The drama of Swing was disciplined, structured and it conformed to a set of conventions that, though to an extent flexible in operation, were as well-established and as immutable as those of any Elizabethan standard. Within this drama, there was even a part for the cloak-and-dagger villain, Swing the rick-burner. A black-hearted figure, he remained in the background, unseen and largely undiscovered, but though his part was

played offstage he was central to the action. His was the shadow that darkened the whole landscape of the disturbances; his role suited perfectly whatever spectre the public chose to superimpose on it, and in many ways it was his threat that enabled the crowd to operate in open day with such restraint and yet with such success.

The drama of Swing had no need of a script, of course. Nonetheless, the conventions to which it conformed were refined and long established, and they can be systematically identified in operation elsewhere in the culture of the labouring poor, in particular in their ballads and songs. Like Swing, the rural ballads of the early-nineteenth century functioned locally and in the wider social arena: both have been described here as 'meta-movements' – movements whose conventions carried a peculiarly local meaning when applied in the locality but which had a second and more fundamental meaning when viewed overall, regionally or super-regionally. In terms of the popular consciousness of the rural labouring poor (and in terms of the events of Swing), one of the central themes of the ballads and songs was a sophisticated and far-reaching model of social relations in the countryside. Within this model, farmers, landowners and labourers constituted a legitimate economic hierarchy; each had his or her position within this hierarchy, but along with that position came certain immutable obligations and responsibilities. By the early-nineteenth century, farmers were widely perceived as having abrogated these obligations and responsibilities and part of the function of rural ballads was to call for their restoration and fulfilment. Ballads were, though, much more than merely a means of chronicling or lamenting lost privileges. Locally, along with other aspects of shared cultural experience, they no doubt reminded individuals and communities of how different their experience of social relations was to the 'legitimate' model they contained. But on a different level they also functioned to pull together all those who shared that model into a coherent social force – loosely constituted, certainly, but identifiable nonetheless. This social force was identified in Chapter 2 as 'the people'; its values, the values of 'populism'. Despite the traditionally inexact and problematic nature of these terms, it became clear that when applied to the popular culture of the rural labouring poor they do point to a set of values and attributes that taken as a whole formed a dynamic and internally consistent social critique. Unlike the divisions implicit in many class-based social models applied by later historians though, they were founded on the premise that in their proper functioning, rural social relations were essentially harmonious and inclusive, that it was perfectly possible to be a farmer, an employer, a capitalist, *and* a rural populist. They relied for their authority on the application of perceived precedent – of an 'historical

sense' – and on the transcendent nature of the responsibilities and obligations which inhered in them. And even as late as 1830, 'the people' and their values included a much wider constituency than just the labourers themselves.

One of the reasons why the values of populism remained so dynamic in the first third of the nineteenth century is that they were to a large extent shared, and even applied as a working model of social relations, by many of the structurally superior in the countryside. Despite the stern words of Lord Melbourne, farmers gave in to the demands of the Swing crowds time and again, magistrates agreed to set revised wage-scales and to counsel the destruction of threshing machines. Of course, in 1830 much of this action was taken under considerable duress; but there is evidence to suggest that much of it was not. Pamphleteers and commentators from William Cobbett down argued the case of the labourers, accusing farmers of departing from their responsibilities and haranguing them for their excessive 'pride' and greed, and up to two years after the disturbances many local administrators took the opportunity offered by the Rural Queries of the Poor Law Commissioners to register their continued disquiet. At the heart of this critique of farmers' behaviour, of course, was the issue of land. It was the engrossment of land, the ballads argued, which had signalled the end of the social compact in the countryside, and a good part of the structurally superior agreed. Land had made farmers greedy and proud, had tempted them away from the common table of master and men, and with the engrossment of land had come the swallowing up of small farms, removing the 'intermediate staves' of the rural social ladder and leaving only 'gentlemen' farmers and pauperised labourers. The solution was clear: "if each great farm was taken in and divided into ten," argued 'Swaggering Farmers', "we might see happy days again among industrious men".[1] But labourers were not so naïve as to believe that farmers could be persuaded to give up their land and their new lifestyles, no matter how righteous the polemic or how angry the words. Instead, in 1830 they forced the issue in the lanes and across the fields of southern England. They compelled and coerced farmers (and others in authority) into a symbolic relationship with their structurally inferior neighbours that conformed to the values of populism; they restored through force of numbers the social compact, showing by their discipline, order and the use of customary precedent just how social relations *should* operate in the countryside. They demanded only what it would be difficult, if not impossible, to refuse according to the harmonious and inclusive values of

[1] See Appendix.

populism – and of course, this did not include the restoration of small farms or a general redistribution of land. But the message – which was implicit in the operation rather than the overt demands of the Swing disturbances – was clear: farmers must return to the 'common table' of masters and men, and labourers must once again be treated as their social equals. And this could only be achieved once the 'intermediate staves' in the rural social ladder had been restored. It is no coincidence, then, that one of the most lasting effects of the 1830 disturbances was a significant increase in the provision of allotments of land for rural labourers in the south of England.

No matter how socially or materially insignificant the early provision of allotments may appear to us now, and no matter how difficult it might be to separate the actual provision of allotments from the moral pronouncements of the allotment 'movement', there can be little doubt that for labourers themselves they were hugely significant. They gave back at least some of the agricultural labourer's precious independence from total reliance on the wage, on relief, and on the caprice of his employer. Time and again, this was implicitly acknowledged in the objections – sometimes violent – of farmers to any concession of land to labourers. But at least as important was the symbolic relevance of allotments. In Jeremy Burchardt's words they "blurred the distinction" between labourer and farmer[2]: they went some way, no matter how small, to restoring the 'intermediate staves' in rural society – an allotment-holding labourer stood alongside his employer as an *occupier*, not beneath him as a landless proletarian. His occupation may only have been of a quarter of an acre, but on the ladder of rural social relations it was an important step to make. Finally, allotments spoke to an even more basic desire in the villager, the desire to be at least partially self-sufficient. It was a need that was alluded to by William Cobbett in *Cottage Economy*, by John Denson in *A Peasant's Voice to Landowners*, and by Captain Scobell, when he told the 1843 *Select Committee on the Labouring Poor* that they "must have land…for land is like air…it is necessary to the rural labourer".[3]

In many ways – and in the nature of these things – this thesis ends at the point at which the questions raised start to become *really* interesting. For example, the issue of how far the landless labourer – Hobsbawm and Rudé's fully proletarianized agricultural worker – actually *felt* himself to be a proletarian, and how far he held out the legitimate hope of returning to the ranks of landholding producers, has hardly been addressed. Mick

[2] See above, p.140.

Reed has already indicated how, despite the agrarian transformation of England in the eighteenth century, something very like an English peasantry remained well into the nineteenth, and that this class of "household producers...were concerned primarily with obtaining a living, rather than maximising profit. In a word, they were concerned...mainly with *subsistence*".[4] With this in mind, it is perhaps not so fanciful to suggest that central to the populist social model of a legitimate economic hierarchy was the not unrealistic expectation that rural society could be more equitably re-ordered to take account of this emphasis on subsistence; that allotments were seen as part of the mechanism by which this could be achieved; and that the central message of the Swing disturbances was not so much 'bread and no machines' but, as Jeremy Seabrook has pointed out elsewhere, that "the opposite of poverty is not wealth, but sufficiency".[5]

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[3] See above, p.128.
[4] Mick Reed, 'Class and Conflict in Rural England: Some Reflections on a Debate' in M Reed and R Wells (eds.), *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880* (London 1990), p.12.
[5] Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook, *The Revolt Against Change: towards a conserving radicalism* (London 1993), p.75.

APPENDIX: Ballads and Songs of the Labouring Poor

NOTE: Wherever possible facsimile reproductions of the original broadside ballads are included. However, where this is not possible (either because of the quality of the facsimile or because the ballad was taken from a secondary source) a faithful transcription has been made. Wherever a word in the original is indistinct or indecipherable, a suggestion or gap is indicated by square brackets.

Ballads appear in alphabetical order:

i. 'CONTENTMENT: or the Happy Work-Man's Song'
ii. 'Cottage well-thatched with Straw, The'
iii. 'Faithful Plough, The'
iv. 'Farmer, The'
v. 'Former Days'
vi. 'Gentlemen Farmers'
vii. 'Husbandman and Servingman, The'
viii. 'Loom and the Lathe, The'
ix. 'New Fashioned Farmer, The'
x. 'New Song on the Hiring of Servants, A'
xi. 'Old Hat, The'
xii. 'Poor Labourers, The'
xiii. 'Spade!, The'
xiv. 'Swaggering Farmers'
xv. 'We Will Not Stop Again'
xvi. 'What Will Old England Come To'

CONTENTMENT:

OR, THE

Happy Work-Man's Song.

By John Byrom MA, FRS,

254

TUNE, *Which No-body can deny*, &c.

I.

I Am a poor Workman as rich as a *Jew*,
A strange sort of Tale, but however 'tis true,
Come listen a while and I'll prove it to you
So as No-body can deny, &c.

II.

I am a poor Workman you'll easily grant,
And I'm rich as a *Jew*, for there's nothing I want,
I have Meat, Drink, and Cloaths and am hearty & cant,
Which No-body can deny, &c.

III.

I live in a Cottage and yonder it stands,
But while I can work with these two honest Hands,
I'm happy as those that have Houses and Lands,
Which No-body can deny, &c.

IV.

I keep to my Workmanship all the Day long,
I sing and I whistle, and this is my Song,
Thank God that has made me so lusty and strong,
Which No-body can deny, &c.

V.

I never am greedy of delicate Fare,
If God give enough tho' 'tis never so bare,
The more is his Love and the less is my Care,
Which No-body can deny, &c.

VI.

Folk cry'n out hard Times, but I never regard,
For I ne'er did, nor will set my Heart up o'th' Ward,
So 'tis all one to me bin they easy or hard.
Which No-body can deny, &c.

VII.

I envy not them that have thousands of Pounds,
That sport o'er the Country with Horses and Hounds;
There's nought but *Contentment* can keep within bounds
Which No-body can deny, &c.

VIII.

I ne'er lose my Time o'er a Pipe or a Pot,
Nor cower in a Nook like a sluggardly Sot,
But I buy what is wanting with what I have got,
Which No-body can deny, &c.

IX.

And if I have more than I want for to spend,
I help a poor Neighbour or diligent Friend;
He that gives to the Poor to the Lord he doth lend,
Which No-body can deny, &c.

X.

I grudge not that Gentlefolk dressen so fine;
At their Gold and their Silver I never repine,
But I wish all their Guts were as hearty as mine,
Which No-body can deny, &c.

XI.

With Quarrels o'th' Country and Matters of State,
With *Tories and Whigs* I ne'er puzzle my Pate;
There's some that I love, and there's none that I hate,
Which No-body can deny, &c.

XII.

What tho' my Condition be ever so coarse,
I strive to embrace it for better and worse,
'Tis God that appoints it, as far as I see,
And I'm sure I can never do better than He,
Which No-body can deny, &c.

HALIFAX: Printed by P. DARBY.

Manchester Central Reference Library: BR Q398.8 S9 V.3; 'Printed by P. Darby, Halifax' (n.d.)

The Cottage well-thatched with Straw

In the days of yore there sat at his door
And old farmer, and thus said he,
With his pipe and his glass, "I wish that half
The world was as happy as me:
I envy not the rich nor the great,
Nor the proudest I ever saw
While I have home-brewed, brown bread,
And a cottage well-thatched with straw."

Chorus
A cottage well-thatched with straw,
A cottage well-thatched with straw,
While I have home-brewed, brown bread,
And a cottage well-thatched with straw.

"My father he built this snug little cot,
He got it I'll tell you how,
'Twas the sweetest money that ever was got,
For twas earned with the sweat of his brow:
'Now,' says my old dad, 'take care, my lad,
To keep out o' the squire's claw,
While you have home-brewed, brown bread,
And a cottage well-thatched with straw.'

"Neither ragged nor torn I turn from my door,
But give him a crust of brown,
And a drop of my home-brewed beer, my boors,
To wash the brown crust down:
Though rich I be, it might happen to me,
Misfortune might on me fall,
And on my home-brewed, brown bread,
And my cottage well-thatched with straw.

"Be it frost or snow to church I go,
No matter the weather how,
And a favourite prayer I put up there
To Him who speeds the plough:
Now Sunday saints they meet all week
With their ranting, chanting gall,
But they'll never get home-brewed, brown bread,
And a cottage well-thatched with straw."

This version from: A Williams, *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames* (London 1923)

The Faithful Plough

Come, all you jolly ploughmen, of courage stout and bold,
That labour all the winter through the stormy winds and cold;
For to clothe your fields with plenty, and your farmyards to renew,
That bread may not be wanted, we must use the faithful plough.

Says the ploughman to the gardener, "Count not your trade as ours,
But walk the curious borders and look upon your flowers;
If it hadn't been for the ploughman, both rich and poor would rue,
For they are all dependent upon the faithful plough."

Now Adam was a ploughman, when ploughing first begun,
And next that did succeed him was Cain, his eldest son;
Some of this generation the calling now pursue,
For we are all dependent upon the faithful plough.

Samson was a strong man, and Solomon was wise,
Alexander for to conquer was all that we do prize;
King David was a valiant man, and many a thousand slew,
Yet none of these great heroes could live without the plough.

I hope that those who hear this will hold to what is true,
For we cannot sail the ocean wide without the faithful plough;
For they must have their beer and biscuits, plum puddings, flour, and peas,
For to feed the jolly sailors that plough the raging seas.

I hope there's none offended, now, with me for singing this,
For it never was intended to be anything amiss;
If you consider it rightly, you'll find that it is true,
For all the trades I've mentioned depend upon the plough.

This version from A Williams, *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames* (London 1923)

The FARMER.

COME each jolly fellow,
That loves to be mellow,
Attend unto me and sit easy;
For a bottle in quiet,
My boys, let us try it,
For dull thinking will make a man crazy;
Whilst here I am king,
Let us laugh, dance, and sing;
Let no mortal appear as a stranger;
But shew me the ass
That refuses his glass,
And I'll order him grass in a manger.
Lal de lal, &c.

By reaping and mowing,
By plowing and sowing,
Dull Nature supplies me plenty;
I've a plentiful board,
And a cellar well stor'd,
And my garden supplies ev'ry dainty:
I have land, I have bowers,
I have fruits, I have flowers,
And I'm here as a Justice of quorum;
In my cabin's far end
I've a bed for a friend,
With a clean fire-side and a jorum.
Lal de lal, &c.

Was it not for my seeding
You would have poor feeding,
For indeed you would soon starve without me;
My mind it is content
When I pay my own rent,
And I'm happy when friends are about me.
Draw near to my table,
Ye boys that are able,
Let us hear no more words of complaining,
For the ringing of glasses,
All music surpasses,
I long to see bottles a draining.
Lal de lal, &c.

Let the mighty and great
Roll in splendor and state,
As I envy no mortal, I swear it;
For I eat my own ham,
My own chicken, and lamb,
And I shear my own sheep and I wear it;
I have all things in season,
Such a woodcock and pheasan',
And the lark is my morning alarmer,
So may each good fellow
When inclin'd to get mellow,
Drink the plough and the good honest farmer.
Lal de lal, &c.

Bodleian Library, Oxford: Harding B11 (1150); no publ. (n.d.)

FORMER DAYS.

—o-o-o—

GOOD people give attention,
While I sing in praise,
Of the happy situation
That was in former days:
When my father kept a farm,
And my mother milk'd her cow,
How happy were the days then,
To what they are now.
My mother she did knit.
And my sister she did spin,
And by their own industry,
They kept us neat and clean:
I rose early in the morning,
And with my father went to plow,
How happy were the days then,
To what they are now.
My sister went to market,
When her little sheep were shorn,
And our neighbours was supply'd,
With plenty of good corn,
At Half-a-Crown a bushell,
We could sell it at I vow,
How happy were the days then,
To what they are now.
We never knew the time,
Since we knew the country round,
That butter was sold
For more than four-peace per pound
A quart of new milk
For a penny, from the cow,
How happy were the days then,
To what they are now.
My blessing on the 'Squire,
For he gave us much content,
And well he entertained us,
When we went to pay our rent;
With flaggons of brown ale,
We sung 'Farmers speed the plough,
How happy were the days then,
To what they are how.
At length the 'Squire died,
God bless his ancient face,
Another full of pride,
Came heir to his estate,
Who took my father's farm away,
And others then, I vow,
Which brought us to this wretched state
Which we are all at now.
May God bless the poor of England,
And raise some honest heart,
For to relieve their distresses,
Who have long felt the smart:
And take all the large farms away,
And divide them into ten,
Then we may be as happy
As ever we were then.

Manchester Central Reference Library: BR Q398.8 S9 V5; 'Taylor, Printer, Moor-St, Birmingham' (n.d.)

Bodleian Library, Oxford: Harding B12(156): 'Burbage and Stretton, Printers', Nottingham (between 1797 and 1807)

Gentlemen Farmers
For the year 1783

Farmers and Gentlemen of England,
Unto me pray lend an ear,
A story I am going to tell you,
Which you will not like to hear,
I mean to speak of the oppression,
Which you on the poor do lay,
And when my matter is ended,
Let me know what you can say.
Farmers look back on your forefathers,
No more than three score years ago
The farmers wives would spin their gowns,
In which they made a comely show;
The farmers wore russet Lindsey,
When the trudg'd to pay their rent,
Which plainly shew'd their great industry,
And gave their landlords much content,
But now of late the case is alter'd;
The devil has taught you how to farm,
You nor your wives, can wear no Lindsey,
No home made shirts, nor stocking yarn;
You and your wives are dress'd and powder'd,
The richest cloaths you can devise,
A prancing horse, your boots and fours on,
To pay your rent away you ride.
The statesman seeing all this grandeur,
O! says he I'll raise my land,
My tenants live more high than I do,
They have all things at their command;
And thus you farmers brought the bondage,
Upon yourselves and the labouring poor,
And now who can the poor man complain to,
Of the burthens they endure.
Your father likewise kept a dairy,
That the poor might be supply'd,
But you have turn'd then into horses,
That you may so gallant ride;
They with fat beef did feed the nation,
Your horses are now meat for dogs,
And you starve the poor of England,
Which offends Almighty God.
For wheat, for oats, for beans, and barley,
Meat, Butter, Cheese, we do pay dear,
If we complain you tell us plainly,
It will be worse another year,
Your wives and daughters dress like ladies,
Likewise they must be madam call'd,
And mad I think both you and they are,
I think the Devil's possessed you all;
Sirs if this pride you would forsake,
And the poor of their [------] ease,
Then bred more beasts, and fewer horses,
And send no corn beyond the seas.
How many labouring men and women,
Daily live in grief and dread,
Altho' they labour late and early,
Yet hear their children cry for bread,
Gentlemen farmers pray remember,
That one God did make us all,
And let us have provisions cheaper,
For to feed our children small.
How hardly shall a rich man enter,
Into Heaven our redeemer cry'd,
He said 'tis easier for a camel,
To pass through a needle's eye.
Farmers how shall I now bespeak you,
Why will you poor people starve,
Who daily labour for to serve you,
Some strange judgement you deserve;
And that there may be no complaining,
For evermore and God help us all,
That we may live in peace and plenty,
Farmers how do you like my call.

The Husbandman and the Servingman

Servingman
Well met! well met! my friend,
All on the highway riding
So simply alone, as you stand;
Oh pray! come tell to me
What calling you might be?
Oh, are you not a servingman?

Husbandman
Oh no, my brother dear!
What makes thee to inquire
Of any such thing at my hand?
Indeed! I'll not refrain,
But I will tell thee plain,
I am a downright husbandman.

Servingman
If a husbandman you be,
Pray! come along with me,
So instantly out of hand;
For I think, within some space,
I will take you to a place
Where you can be a servingman.

Husbandman
As for thy diligence
I return thee many thanks,
I require no such thing at thy hand;
But something to me show,
Whereby that I may know
The pleasures of a servingman.

Servingman
Why! a servingman has pleasure
Beyond all measure,
With the cup and the glass in his hand;
The meat that he doth eat,
And the game that he doth keep -
That's the pleasure for a servingman.

Husbandman
My pleasure's more, I know,
To see my corn to grow,
And so thriving it grows on the land;
So, therefore, I do mean,
To go ploughing with my team,
To keep myself a husbandman.

Servingman
Kind sir! it's a fine thing
To ride out with the king,
Lord, duke, earl, or any such one;
To hear the horns to blow,
See the hounds all in a row -
That's your pleasure for a servingman.

Husbandman
My pleasure's more than that,
To see my oxen fat,
And my stack of good hay by them stand,
My ploughing and my sowing,
My reaping and my mowing -
That's the pleasure for a husbandman.

Servingman
Kind sir! then we do wear
Things costly, rich and rare,
Our coats all gold lace have on;
Our shirts as white as milk,
Our stockings they are silk -
That's your habit for a servingman.

Husbandman
As for thy gaudy gear,
Give me the clothes I wear,
Green bushes to trample upon;
Give me a good great-coat,
And in my purse a groat -
That's your habit for a husbandman.

Servingman
Kind sir! they we do eat
Such delicate, fine meat -
Our turkey-cock, caper and swan;
And after we do dine
We drink the best of wine -
That's your living for a servingman.

Husbandman
As for your cock and capon,
Give me some beans and bacon,
And a pot of good ale now and then;
For, in a farmer's house,
There is good ham and souse -
That's your living for a husbandman.

Servingman
Kind sir! it would be bad
If there nothing could be had
The table to wait upon;
There is neither lord nor king,
Nor any gentleman,
Cold do without the servingman.

Husbandman
Kind sir! it would be wuss
If there were none of us
For to plough and to fallow the land;
There is neither lord, duke, king,
Nor any gentleman
Could do without the husbandman.

Servingman
Kind sir! I must confess,
And grant you your request,
And give you the uppermost hand;
Although it is so painful,
Your calling is most gainful -
I wish I was a husbandman.

Husbandman
Then come! let us all
Together, great and small,
Pray for king and grain of the land;
Come! let us for ever
Do our best endeavour
To maintain the husbandman.

This version from A Williams, *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames* (London 1923)

The Loom and Lathe.

Printed by John [illegible] [illegible] Road Manchester, and sold by J [illegible]

Like most other men who've been knocking about,
 Strange places and persons I've seen,
Sometimes I've had plenty, sometimes been without,
 And frequently hard up I've been.
But still tho' dame fortune has been a sad jade,
 And baulked me of many a prize,
What I see I remember, and some say I've made
 A pretty good use of my eyes.

CHORUS.

Then hurrah! for the loom and the lathe,
 Hurrah! for the spade and the plough.
The happiest man I have met with is he,
 Who lives by the sweat of his brow.

The lawyers, with eagerness, pocket the fees,
 But look at them well and you'll find,
Tho' they live in great style, and appear at their ease,
 They're frequently troubled in mind;
The parsons have duties from morning to night
 If they do them but yet I'm afraid,
The living is that, in which most they delight,
 And they make their religion a trade.

The bankers, tho' wealthy, have many a care
 As to how they will double their cash.
But still speculation is often a snare,
 And frequently ends in a smash;
Tho' members of parliament do all they can,
 To get in the house, 'tis no use,
If they wish to be happy, they'll alter their plan,
 For many get naught but abuse.

Some poets & authors who live by their brains,
 Have seldom a shilling to spare,
Beset thro' their lives by grim poverty's pains,
 They frequently die in despair,
They starve in a garret while striving for fame
 Which seldom arrives till they're dead,
Neglected they live—then their works get a name,
 And a monument's built then instead,

The higher the station the more we require,
 And the more we're expected to do,
The greater the income, the more we desire,
 I'm sure you'll acknowledge that's true.
The more we possess, the more anxious we get
 For fear that our wealth should be lost.
The path of the rich is with troubles beset
 As many have found to their cost.

[illegible]! Happy is he on himself who depends,
 If he has but contentment and health
[illegible] industry more to his happiness tends
 Than either position or wealth.
I envy not those who great riches have got,
 For wealth is often a ban.
[illegible] he has the best and the happiest lot,
 [illegible]

16

(Last line: 'Who works-acts-and speaks as a man.')

Manchester Central Reference Library: BR Q398.8 S9 V.1; 'Printed by John [Bebbington]…Oldham Road, Manchester' (n.d.)

The New Fashioned Farmer

Good people all, attend awhile,
Whilst I relate a story,
How the farmers in old England,
Did once support their glory.
When masters liv'd as masters ought,
And happy in their station,
Until at length, their stinking pride,
Has ruined all the nation.

Chorus
Let's pray that hungry bellies may
Be fill'd when they are empty,
And where a servant gets ten pounds,
I wish he may get twenty.

A good old fashioned long grey coat,
The farmers us'd to wear, Sir,
And on old Dobbin they would ride,
To market or to fair, Sir,
But now fine geldings they must mount,
To join all in the chace, Sir,
Dressed up like any lord or 'squire,
Before their landlord's face, Sir.

In former times, both plain and neat,
They'd go to Church on Sunday,
And then to harrow, plow, or sow,
They'd go upon a Monday.
But now, instead of the plough tail,
O'er hedges they are jumping,
And instead of sowing of their corn,
Their delight is in fox hunting.

The good old dames, God bless their names,
Were seldom in a passion,
But strove to keep a right good house,
And never thought on fashion.
With fine brown beer their hearts to cheer,
But now they must drink swipes, Sir,
It's enough to make a strong man weak,
And give him the dry gripes, Sir.

The farmer's daughters used to work,
All at the spinning wheel, Sir,
But, now, such furniture as that,
Is thought quite ungenteel, Sir.
Their fingers they're afraid to spoil,
With any such kind of sport, Sir,
Sooner than handle mop or broom,
They'd handle a piano-forte, Sir.

Their dress was always plain and warm,
When in their holiday clothes, Sir,
Besides, they had such handsome cheeks,
As red as any rose, Sir,
But now, they're frilled and furbelowed,
Just like a dancing monkey,
Their bonnets and their great black veils,
Would almost frighten a donkey.

When wheat it was a guinea a strike,*
The farmers bore the sway, Sir,
Now with their landlords they will ride,
Upon each hunting day, Sir.
Besides, their daughters they must join
The ladies at the Ball, Sir,
The landlords say, we'll double their rents,
And then their pride must fall, Sir.

I hope no one will think amiss,
At what has here been penned, Sir,
But let us hope that these hard times
May speedily amend, Sir.
It's all through such confounded pride,
Has brought them to reflection,
It makes poor servants' wages low,
And keeps them in subjection.

This version from J Ashton, *Modern Street Ballads* (London 1888)

A New Song on the Hiring of Servants

You young men and maidens draw near for awhile,
I will sing you a song that will cause you to smile
The time for the hiring is coming you see,
Cheer up lads & lasses we'll have a good spree.

So come to the hiring and make no delay,
Servants and [-----] stand like [Nero] so gay,
You brisk lads and lasses [awend] you to town,
Do not let the farmers your wages cut down.

For the farmer and wife snug in bed they may stay
And sit to their breakfast of eggs and fine tea
At four in the morning to work we must go
To reap mow and harrow and to follow the plow.

You must attend the horses I vow it is no lie,
Do all sorts of work in cold wet and dry
When the days work is over after supper at night,
We must clean out the cart and do all things right.

The farmer and his wife as you may understand,
In their parlour can feed off the fat of the land
In the kitchen the servant gets porridge red hot
For to keep them a running to the ----- in a trot.

Its not like the days in the good olden times
When the servant and master together did dine
But that the farmer has riches to mock
He sends now to [-----] his butter and stock.

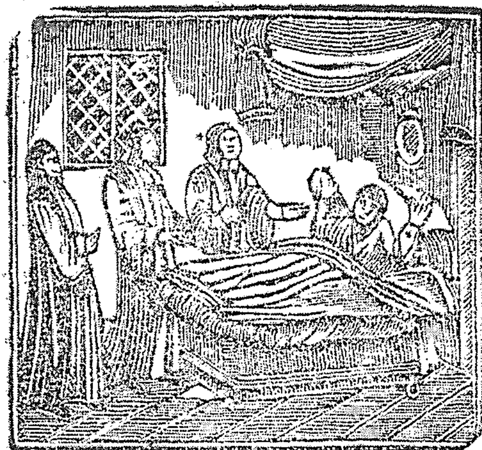
But hear how I long for my time to be over
Hard work and bad feeding and to hell enough,
Would any one think it would make our head reel,
And her cold frosty forehead would surely make us feel.

The poor servant girl without any doubt,
It is better for them to be slaves in the south,
They must [scour] milk and cream and [-----] I do declare,
When the days work is must go without shoes.

You farmers take warning I hear people say,
The servants of [-----] are all going away,
They are going to America as you may understand
You must give them all wages or give up your land.

Long life to the farmers wherever they be
That kind to the servants in every degree.
I wont curse the landlords in truth I'll tell you,
But hope that the devil will soon get the crew.

Bodleian Library, Oxford: Harding B26(253); no publ. (n.d.)



THE OLD HAT.

I AM a poor old man in years come liſten to my ſong,
Proviſions now are twice as dear as when I was young,
It was when this old hat was new and ſtood upon my
brow,
O what a happy youth was I when this old hat was new.

It's almoſt fourſcore years ago, the truth I do declare,
When men could take each others' words, and thought
it very fair, [were ſo true,
No note or bond they did require, men's words they
It was ſo in my youthful days when my old hat was new

Brotherly love it did abound, oppreſſion ne'er was heard
But now the people are ſo poor they ſcarcely can get
bread, [what to do,
Which makes them wander up and down, not knowing
Such times did not abound when this old hat was new.

Upon the time of harveſt when we went out to ſhear,
How often have we merry made with brandy, ale, and
beer;
And when the corn was got and thrown into the mow,
The ſhearers punch'd it well when this old hat was new

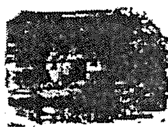
The maſter at the board-head ſat the table for to grace
The ſervants as they all came in each took his proper
place,
And the dame with chearful heart gave to each man his
due, [was new.
Such plenty, ah! did then abound when this old hat

But now the times are alter'd, and pinching to the poor
They now receive their wages quite coldly at the door,
Into their houſe we do not come, tho' we be e'er ſo few
It was not ſo when Beſs did reign or this old hat was
new.

The commons they are taken in & cottages pull'd down
And Moggy has no wool to ſpin a linſey woolſey gown,
The winter's cold, the clothing thin & blankets very few
We were well cloathed both bed and ſkin when this old
hat was new.

Swindells, Printer.

Manchester Cetnral Reference Library: BR Q398.8 S9 V.1; 'Swindells, Printer', Manchester (n.d.)



THE POOR
LABOURERS.

YOU sons of old England, now list to my rhymes,
And I'll sing unto you a short sketch of the times,
Concerning poor labourers you all must allow,
Who work all the day at the tail of the plough.

CHORUS.

O, the poor labourers, pity poor labourers,
That are working for five or six shillings per week.

There's many poor labourers to work they will go,
Either hedging or ditching to plough or to sow,
And many poor fellows are used like a Turk,
They do not get paid for half a days work.

And many poor labourers I'm sorry to say
Are breaking of stones for eightpence a day;
Bread and water's the fare of the poor labouring man,
While the rich they can live on the fat of the land.

Some pity the farmers, but I tell you now,
Pity poor labourers that follow the plough,
Pity poor children half starving and then,
Divide every great farm into ten.

There are many young fellows you'll see every day,
For snaring a hare they are banished away,
To Van Dieman's land or to some foreign shore,
And their wives and children are left to deplore.

There's many a farmer that's making a fuss,
While the poor are starving, can scarce get a crust,
Do away with their hounds and their hunters so gay,
And give the poor labourers a little fair play.

Fair play is a stranger these many years past,
And pity's bunged up in an old oaken cask
But the time's fast approaching, it's very near come,
When we'll have all the farmers under our thumbs.

JOLLY MORTALS
FILL YOUR GLASSES.

Jolly mortals fill your glasses!
Noble deeds are done by wine:
Scorn the nymph and all her graces,—
Who'd for love or beauty pine?

Look within the bowl that's flowing,
And a thousand charms you find,
More than Phillis has though going,
In a moment to be kind.

Alexander hated thinking,
Drank about at council-board,
He subdued the world by drinking,
More than by his conquering sword.

Henson, Printer, &c., Lower Nene Bridge Street
Northampton.

Bodleian Library, Oxford: Firth c.16(300): 'Henson, Printer...Northampton' (n.d.)

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Fair play is a stranger these many years past,
And pity's bunged up in an old oaken cask
But the time's fast approaching, it's very near come,
When we'

THE SPADE !

MANCHESTER ; Printed and sold by THOMAS PEARSON, Machine Printer, 4, and 6, Chadderton Street, Oldham Road:

GIVE me the spade and the man that can use it,
A fig for the lord with his soft silken hand,
Let he who has strength to abuse it,
Give it back to the giver the land boys the land,
There's no bank like the earth to desposit your land,
The more you desposit the more you shall have
There's more than you want you can give it to your Neighbour,
And your name shall be dear to the true and the brave,

Give me the spade old England's glory,
That fashioned the field from black burned moor.
Let us sing of it's praises in both ballade and story,
That's brighten'd with labour not tarnished with gone,
It was not the sword that won our first battle,
Created our commence, extended our day,
Give food for our wifes, our children, our cattle,
The Queen of all weapons is the spade boys, the spade,

Give me the spade there's a magic about it,
That turns the black soil, into bright shining gold.
What would our fathers have done without it,
When the lands was all bare and the north wind blew cold,
Where tall forest stood wild breast were yield ing.
And our stouthearted ancest'rs shrunk back afraid
The corn stack is ruined and man claims a dwelling,
Then hurrah for our true friend the spade boys, the spade.

Oh, dear ! I really quite forget, with a note I was sent out,
To fetch an answer, but I think I'll see what its about.
Ha ! it is for Doctor Jones, I've been there once before,
But I don't think I'm so jolly green, as to go there anymore.

Spoken.—No, never no more—not for me, (read letter.) Doctor Joe, plesse give the bearer a strong dose of Salts and Senna, (Oh ! lawks.) and make him take it, before leaving your shop. I know a boy I'll give him a penny, and make him take it. Missus's principle of working aint good enough for me. I'm half inclined to give her a mouth's warning and leave her next Saturday, and go and live with the Prince of Wales. But I does feel so jolly hungrey. I aint had a bit of anything since I've been singing this song. and its very hard you know,—fo.

No. 579.

Manchester Central Reference Library: BR Q398.8 S9 V.4; 'Printed and Sold by Thomas Pearson...Chadderton Streed, Oldham Road' (n.d.)

SWAGGERING FARMERS.

COME all you Swaggering Farmers wherever you may be,
One moment give attention and listen unto me,
It is concerning former times as I to you declare,
So different to the present times, if you with them compare.

For lofty heads and paltry pride I'm sure is all the go,
For to distress poor servants, and to keep their wages low.

If you had seen the farmer's wives about fifty years ago,
In homespun linsey russet were clad from top to toe,
But now a days the farmer's wives are so puff'd up with pride,
In a dandy habit and green veil to market they must ride.

Some years ago the farmer's sons were learn'd to plough & sow,
And when summer time did come, likewise to reap and mow;
But now they dress like squire's sons, their pride knows no bounds,
They mount upon a fine blood horse and follow up the hounds.

The farmer's daughters formerly were taught to card and spin,
And by their own industry good husbands they could win;
But now the card and spinning wheel are forced to take their chance,
While they hop off to boarding school to learn to sing and dance.

In a decent black bonnet to church they used to go,
Black shoes and handsome cotton gown, stockings white as snow
But now silk gown and coloured shoes they must be bought for them,
Besides their frizzled furbelows just like a Frizeland hen.

Each morning when at breakfast each master and each dame,
Along with the servants they would eat and drink the same;
But now with such good old things they're done them quite away
Into the parlour they must go with coffee, toast, and tea.

At the kitchen Table formerly the farmer he would sit,
And carve for all the servants both pudding and good meat,
But now all in the dining room so closely the're box'd in,
If a servant only were to peep it would be thought a sin.

Now in these good old fashion'd days the truth I do declare,
The rents and taxes could be paid, and money have to spare;
But now to keep the fashions up they look so very nice,
Altho' they cut an outward show, they are as poor as mice.

When Buonaparte was in vogue poor servants could engage
For 16 pounds a year my boys, and that was a handsome wage;
But now the wages are so low, and what is worse than all,
The master cannot find the cash, which brings them to the wall.

When 50 acres they did rent the money they did save,
But now for to support their pride 500 they must have;
But if each great farm was taken in and divided into ten,
We might see happy days again among industrious men.

Bodleian Library, Oxford: Harding B11 (3710);
'Walker, Printer, Durham', between 1979 and 1834

Swaggering farmers

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WE WILL NOT

STOP AGAIN.

The servant lads and lasses gay, now Whitsuntide draws near,
Unto the hirings come to seek out places for next year,
If our old places do not suit, we'll tell our masters plain,
For a fresh service we will look, and will not stop again.

With farmer Skingut I did live for seven years or more,
But the living does get worse and worse, and the wages lower and lower
He wants a man to work for nought, but he will be miste'rn
We will look out for fresh places boys, and will not stop again.

At four o'clock we servants rise each morning of our life,
While Skingut in his warm bed lies a fuddling with his wife,
We must face all kinds of weather boys, both snow, and storm, and rain,
So if Skingut pulls our wages down we will not stop again.

In former times the farmer with his servants took his seat,
And his dame was not too proud to help him when he carv'd the meat,
Plum pudding, roast beef, and strong ale, the servants liv'd on then,
But now the times are altered, so we will not stop again.

The farmer used to hold the plough, or help in the farm yard,
But now he is as stiff and fat as a hogshead full of lard,
The pudding, beef and ale are gone and nothing does remain,
But bacon, black bread, and sour swipes, so we will not stop again.

Old Skingut says the times get worse as he begins to feel,
Thro' the Tariff and the Income Tax laid on by Bobby Peel,
The rents are high and markets low—he sorely does complain,
So he wants poor lads to work for nought, but we'll not stop again.

Now to conclude and make an end of these my simple rhymes,
May old fashions revive again and all see better times,
May rents come down and all great farms be parted into ten,
Then servants will get better wages and all will stop again.

Sold by J. Livsey, 43, Hanover Street, Shudehill, Manchester.

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Bodleian Library, Oxford: Harding B11(4097);
'Sold by J. Livsey, 43, Hanover Street,
Shudehill, Manchester' (n.d.)

WHAT WILL Old England COME TO.

Printer . . . n-street

Come all you jolly young fellows and listen awhile to my song,
I'll warrant you'll say it's true & I will not detain you long,
It's concerning the rigs of the farmers, which causes poor servants to rue,
It's all through their pride and ambition.
Oh! what will poor England come to?

When my grandmother was a young woman, O then what doings were there?
When servants did eat with their master and drank the best cider and beer,
But now they're shov'd in the back kitchen the coarsest provision to chew,
And are forced to drink belly vengeance. O what, &c.

When the harvest had used to come O that was the working man's joy,
But now for to reap & mow, it's strangers they all do employ
A man that stops in own parish has scarce any work for to do,
While his family they are half-starvin. O what, &c.

It's plenty of good beef and mutton to the field they used to bring,
With plenty of good beer and cider, 'twould make a man whistle and sing,
But now it's black bread and skim cheese as tough as the sole of a shoe,
With a drop of small beer and sour cider. O what, &c.

Now when that the corn is cut the rakers the ground they run o'er,
And scarcely leave an ear for a mouse instead of a loaf for the poor,
Such doings they will have an end, and the d——l he must have his due,
He'll shake them for robbing poor people.

Such confounded schemes and contrivances they do invent every day,
If a poor man owes but a trifle he cannot get money to pay,
And when that the cold winter comes on what causes poor workmen to rue,
And all through these thrashing machines.

Then daughters as grand as a duchess away to the market will ride,
Dress'd up in their habits and veils you can scarce see their faces for pride,
Poor men that like negroes do work get it all by the sweat of their brow,
But if that their pride it should fall why then what will they come to.

So now to conclude and to finish, the truth I think to come near it,
If the cap some should happen to fit why those are the people to wear it,
And I hope that old times may revive then we shall have cause to sing,
Success to each master and mistress. God prosper and live the Queen.

285

Manchester Central Reference Library: BR Q398.8 S9; no publ. (n.d.)

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