

The Wychwoods Local History Society

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CHAPTER IV

Decade of decisions: the 1870s

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As we look at the Wychwood villages in the 1870s it may be helpful to consider the viewpoint and fate of a local agricultural labourer, such as Thomas Turner, a Milton man, who in 1873 was married with a family of eight children. What was lifelike for such a family? How much were they affected by, and aware of, happenings elsewhere in England and overseas?

Farmers at this time had been benefiting from a period of steady or rising prices; in fact, they were near the end of what was later seen as the 'golden age' of Victorian High Farming. The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 had removed protection from home-grown crops but was not immediately followed by a serious slump in prices, as had been feared. It was only after the mid-1870s that competition, first from increased grain imports and later from foreign refrigerated meat, began to have its effect. This was eventually reflected, as we shall see, in a shift to greater dairy and livestock production in the Wychwoods area. More immediately falling corn prices signalled the beginning of a time of difficulty and depression in farming, locally and nationally.

By the 1870s improved communication, not just by rail, but also along improved roads, had enabled the development of a cheap and efficient postal service and telegraph network. Speedy delivery of national, and a rapidly expanding number of local, newspapers was also possible. In Milton and Shipton educational provision had been considerably expanded during the mid-century. The Education Act of 1870 introduced national compulsory elementary education to the age of ten. Levels of literacy began to rise. All these developments were making it more possible for people of all classes to be more aware than ever before of what was happening in other places.

An Oxfordshire farm labourer, like Thomas Turner, in the 1870s was earning 11-12s a week, a basic average of about £35 p.a., allowing for loss of pay during bad weather or illness. Turner may not have read a newspaper, but he was probably aware that industrial workers' wages were higher than his own (in fact some 50% higher), and that farm workers in the north were also able to command better pay. These farmers, faced with competition for labour from nearby manufacturing towns and receiving higher prices for produce because of local market demand, had to be more generous. In Milton Thomas was expected to work long hours, from sunrise to sunset, under very hard conditions for his small and uncertain wage. This pay alone was scarcely enough to feed a family, even on the poorest diet, and was inadequate to provide for reasonable clothing against wet and cold. Many local farm workers lived in cramped conditions, in tied or rented cottages with no security of tenure.

Things did not get better in the Wychwoods during the mid-century. Population rose considerably in both villages between 1801 and 1901, by 53% in Milton and 65% in Shipton. For both communities the most intense period of growth came between the 1830s and 1860s (Table 7 and Figure 4). By 1871 Shipton and Milton had reached a peak of population. Thereafter they experienced stagnation

or absolute decline. It was the 1870s which set the seal on this change of fortune, for it was during these years that the village economies finally proved unable to sustain the rapidly enlarged population. The basic problem was clear in the Milton work force, of which Thomas Turner was part in 1871.

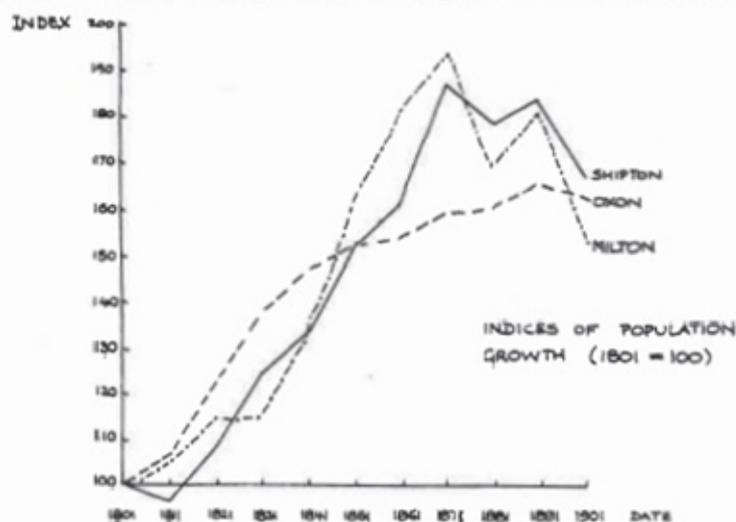
Table 7: Population 1801-1901

Year	Milton under Wychwood	Shipton under Wychwood	Oxfordshire
1801	495	406	111,977
1811	522	395	118,953
1821	567	441	138,224
1831	568	506	153,526
1841	660	546	163,127
1851	799	616	170,434
1861	895	655	179,973
1871	962	761	177,960
1881	836	784	179,593
1891	898	743	185,274
1901	759	672	181,149

Source: Victoria County History of Oxfordshire, Vol. 2

There were ten farmers who employed 58 men, six women and 21 boys, whereas some 100 men were described in the census as farm workers. There was more labour than there were jobs, and despite the non-farming occupations of mason and quarry work for the men, and gloving for the women, there were insufficient alternatives to absorb this surplus (Figure 7). Some of those not taken on by farmers might hope for seasonal work like hedging, ditching, or harvesting, or do casual work like hoeing, stone picking or threshing, but unemployment was becoming an increasing threat to their existence.

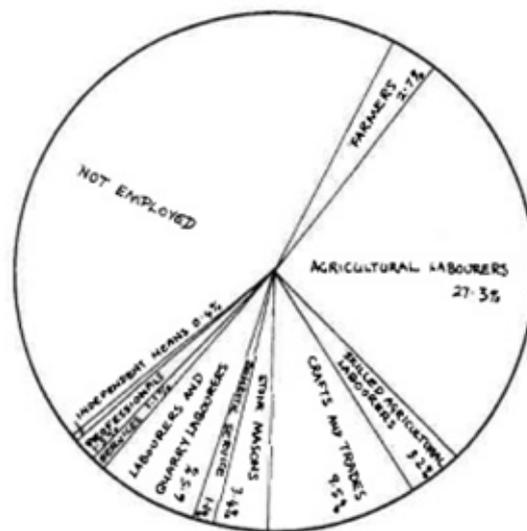
Figure 6: Population change in Milton, Shipton and Oxfordshire 1801-1901



Life had been less grim for villagers when they could still benefit from nearby Wychwood forest. There had been no royal hunting or strict control of the forest since the previous century and people grazed cattle, hunted game and collected fuel there. With enclosure and the clearance of the forest after 1856, there followed a few years when surrounding villages could enjoy surplus timber and venison and there was plenty of work to be had; all this came to an end when the new enclosed

farms came into production. Not only were the villagers deprived of their source of game, probably their only meat apart from a household pig, but the Poaching Prevention Act of 1862 had brought in harsh new measures which enabled the police to search anyone suspected of carrying a bird or rabbit which had been taken illegally. The penalty for night poaching could be three months in jail with hard labour. To add to all this was the new Poor Law introduced in the 1830s and based on a punitive workhouse test.

Figure 7: Milton male occupations in 1871. (Total male population 476)



The growing number of friendly societies in Shipton and Milton at this time shows the dread that labouring families had of becoming unable to support themselves, and worst of all, of suffering the stigma of a pauper burial. The Shipton Friendly Society was established in 1860. It met at the Crown Inn on the second Monday in February, May, August and November when its members spent two hours in friendly but sober company, and paid 4s into the box'. Of this 3s went to the Stock Fund, 6d to the annual feast, 3d to an incidental fund and 3d towards beer. Members had to meet definite conditions before being voted into the society; they must 'bear a good character, be of sound habit of body, not labouring under known or concealed distemper', and be between the ages of 12 and 45 years. After a year's membership they would receive when ill or not working, 8s a week for up to 52 weeks, and then 4s a week. Society membership also ensured a decent burial, not only through help with the daunting expenses, but also through much valued marks of respect from fellow members before and during the funeral. The friendly societies also provided welcome opportunities for fellowship and a rare chance for labourers to organise their own affairs, although, as at Shipton, local clergy and notables were frequently involved.

Outside the quarterly meetings society affairs were operated by two stewards and their four assistants, whose job it was to visit sick members weekly (unless they had smallpox or some other contagious disease), to engage a 'medical man' when necessary, to account for all expenditures, and generally to maintain a well-ordered and respectable appearance. This was the tone of the Society as a whole, with its rules excluding from benefit any member who 'wilfully ran himself into danger, such as cudgeling, or football playing, fighting, drinking or such like', and expelling anyone claiming benefit whilst still working or found 'at a public house or gaming, or engaged in any other improper way'. A door keeper was appointed to ensure that only members entered the Society's meetings.

Despite these sober strictures Society events were enjoyable and important parts of village life. This was especially true of the annual feast, a rare day off work, In Shipton this took place on the

Wednesday of Whitsun week and was paid for from the members' quarterly 6d and an additional payment of 2/6d for the dinner. Feast day had an elaborate ritual of its own. Each member was required to attend divine service, walking in procession in twos 'as they stand on the books', or pay a fine of 1s.

The stewards were to solicit the local clergyman to preach a suitable sermon or be fined 2/6d. Festivities then lasted until ten at night with the feast in the club room at the Crown, followed by a more general fete and fair for the women folk and children of members. To belong to a friendly society was an important thing in a labourer's life; it provided special occasions and fellowship in a hard life, and some relief from the constant threat of unemployment or sickness. Was it enough for the farm labourers of the Wychwood villages?

In the early 1870s rural workers started to take more radical action to remedy their situation. Joseph Arch, a Warwickshire hedge cutter and Primitive Methodist preacher, urged his fellow workers to fight for better pay and conditions by means of a trade union. In February 1872 Arch held his first meeting at Wellesbourne, Warwickshire. Two months later on 16 April the first meeting of what was to become the Oxford District of the National Shipton Friendly Society Club Day, Whitsun 1908.

Agricultural Labourers' Union was held on the green at Milton under Wychwood. Fifty men joined that evening, having appointed 35 year-old Joseph Leggett of Milton as their secretary. Leggett had been born in Windsor, married a Milton girl, and was not himself an agricultural labourer, but a carpenter employed by Alfred Groves of Milton. Like many of his fellow unionists Leggett was a Dissenter in religion, a Baptist. The April meeting elected a committee of six, two from Milton (James Mills, agricultural labourer, and William Barnes, carpenter), two from Shipton William Ri ht and Charles Cox, agricultural labourers) and two from Lyneham. Once started the movement grew at an amazing speed. A week later they held a second meeting, also at Milton, at which rules and objectives were agreed. These included the demand for a nine-hour day, with extra pay of 4d per hour for overtime and Sunday work. The minutes of that meeting state that 'After the rules were read a large number joined the Union from different parishes, an excellent feeling prevailed among the men, who quietly dispersed to their homes'.

By May, only a month later, 13 branches with over 500 members had been set up in the area. Demands were extended to include a basic minimum wage of 13s a week, and a day's work at harvest time of 13 hours, including 2 hours for meals, paid at 4s a day without beer.

The idea of working men joining forces to demand fairer treatment was resented and strongly resisted by the farmers. In July Mr Maddox of Shipton dismissed six of his 25 labourers for joining the union. Tensions affected all three Wychwood villages, including Ascott where, as John Calvertt of Fairspear Farm recorded in his diary, 'Mr. Robert Hambridge told me how lie had been persecuted by the Josh Arch-ites, two or three years ago'. Union members paid a subscription of 2d per week to the union funds, which were used to assist those who suffered loss of employment because of their membership. Thomas Turner of Milton was one of those who claimed assistance; he was paid 9s for-one week in January 1873, perhaps because of a lock out.

In the spring of that year the Wychwoods attracted national attention over the notorious affair of the women 'martyrs of Ascott'. In April Robert.. Hambridge who farmed some 400 acres at Ascott, was approached by his labourers for a rise of 2s per week in their basic wages. Hambridge refused and the men went on strike. Within a week, labourers on other farms in the village followed their example. In May Hambridge decided to hire men from Ramsden to take the place of the strikers. On

the morning of 12 May, a group of wives and daughters of the Ascott strikers met two of these men as they came to work in the village and tried to persuade them to stay away.

Although initially deterred, the men subsequently returned, under the protection of a single police constable, and began work. For their allegedly intimidatory action 17 Ascott women were arrested and charged at Chipping Norton Petty Sessions with breaching the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1871, a piece of legislation aimed at restricting picketing by trade unionists. It was claimed that the women had threatened violence. Sixteen of the Ascott women were found guilty and sent to prison, seven of them for ten days and the remaining nine for seven days hard labour.

They were transported to Oxford jail under police escort. The sentencing magistrates were the Revd W.E.D. Carter, Phillimore's successor as vicar of Shipton, and the Revd Thomas Harris rector of Swerford. The harshness of the sentences, and the fact that two of the women were nursing babies, which had to go to prison with them, caused an outcry not just amongst union supporters but nationally. The affair was debated in the national press and in Parliament. The Lord Chancellor required the Lord Lieutenant, the Duke of Marlborough, to investigate events. Despite the Duke's stalwart defence of the rigorous action of the magistrates the Lord Chancellor disagreed, firmly pointing out to the Duke that 'the authority of the law would have been in this case better vindicated by a different and more lenient course'. Many Wychwood unionists were Nonconformists; and the actions of the local clerical magistrates must have added religious resentment to social and economic grievances. When the Ascott Martyrs were finally released from prison there were large demonstrations, and on 20 June at the gates of Mr. Hambridge's farm, Joseph Arch himself presented each of the 16 women with £5 and a silk dress in royal blue, the union colour.

By this time the NALU Oxford District had set up headquarters in Oxford with Joseph Leggett of Milton as organising secretary. The District was affiliated to the national headquarters of the union in Leamington. The Union made a major policy decision to assist families to emigrate, arguing that as long as there was surplus labour available the farmers would not give in to their demands.

In July 1872, when the first efforts of the Union were being blocked by the farmers, Charles Carter, an emigration agent from a New Zealand construction firm, Brogden and Sons, held a meeting at Shipton, at which he recruited ten families. They left on 13 September, and arrived at Napier, Hawke Bay on 28 December, a journey of over three months. Letters from these first emigrants, giving glowing accounts of life in New Zealand, were passed around at home in Oxfordshire, and did much to encourage others to take the same course. Fares were paid for families on condition that the men either worked for a stated period for the construction firm or agreed to refund the loan once they were settled.

This was the start of a period of massive emigration from the area. Over 200 per 100,000 of population left Oxfordshire, the highest figure for any county except Cornwall, with its special problems of a failing mining industry.

In November 1873 the emigration agent, Carter held another meeting at Milton. This took place in a large marquee, which was used frequently at this time for chapel and union functions. It was owned by Isaac Castle a typical example of the respectable Victorian radical working man. Isaac was a Primitive Methodist who ran a coffee tavern in Milton to assist the cause of temperance. In 1881 he appeared in the census living in High Street, Milton with his wife Anne. Castle was then aged 55 and described as a woodman.

In 1873 his marquee was pitched in a field near the village and there 5-600 gathered for a meeting lit only by lanterns. The audience had come from far and near to hear Carter speak for an hour and 40 minutes on the wonders of life in New Zealand, comparing it to the 'march downhill with the workhouse at the bottom', which they faced in England. A collection of £17 was made to help a group about to leave for Hawkes Bay.

We do not know the exact number who left Milton, but the shipping company records tell of about 100 adults and children going from the village, including Thomas Turner with his large family. By 1881 Milton's population had fallen by 126, a loss of 13% during a decade when Shipton's population fell by 5% and that of Oxfordshire remained stable (Figure 6). The Milton emigrants included several large inter-related families, and many of those active in the union movement and in the Nonconformist chapels. These Dissenting groups, which organised their own affairs and provided lay preachers from amongst their own ranks, did much to provide the determined, lively-minded men of independent and radical spirit who led Wychwood trade unionism in the 1870s.

By comparison with the adjoining village people in Shipton took little part in active unionism. Perhaps Milton's larger population, the fact that it had undergone more rapid and radical changes in its property-owning structure in preceding years, and had no big house or strong Anglican presence, all contributed to its position as the real stronghold of local unionism. Certainly before 1874 only the Wiggins family had emigrated from Shipton. In May 1874

Shipton was described in the NALU journal, *The Chronicle* as a 'large respectable village with only about 14 or 16 in the Union'. Then a party of 17 from Shipton joined the 'Cospatrick', which sailed on 11 September. The ship caught fire in the South Atlantic and sank, leaving no survivors from the 429 emigrants on board. A memorial to this disaster stands on the village green at Shipton showing the names of more extended family groups, the Hedges and the Townsends, lost to the village.

After tragedy interest in emigration waned. The incident was a great shock to the area, and at the same time the outflow of workers that had been taking place during the previous three years was having its effect. Wages and conditions of work were gradually improving as the bargaining powers of the labourers strengthened. Even in Shipton, Union membership increased sharply in 1875. A very large demonstration was held at Milton on Wednesday 28 July 1875. Joseph Arch, the NALU President, was led in procession from Shipton station to Milton village green. Bands played, banners waved, and nearly 800 people had tea in Isaac Castle's great tent. The demonstration was said to have been attended by 3-4,000.

The NALU members certainly had reason to be pleased with their achievements during those first years. Basic wage rates had risen 20-30% between 1873 and 1874, and 40-50,000 people had emigrated under Union-sponsored schemes. Total Union membership had reached over 150,000. From this point however, the movement was destined to run into difficulties. A prolonged period of strikes and lockouts in East Anglia laid great demands on the Union's central funds. When eventually the strike collapsed it led to bitterness in other parts of the country, as branches saw 75% of their contributions being diverted to the Leamington headquarters. There were disputes at the Oxford District HQ as to future policy, and the old strong feelings of united purpose gradually slackened as real wages improved. Of the pioneering leaders many had left for New Zealand, including Joseph Leggett, James Mills and William Barnes, all from Milton. All this weakened the Union's position, but another factor was soon to become dominant.

By the second half of the decade the prosperous years of farming were well and truly over. John Calvert's diary tells of year after year of disastrous weather. Successive harvests were ruined by

rain, and when there was a dry spell it seems to have been fatal to crops, cereal and fodder alike. In years past a bad season might have caused a rise in market prices, but now the American prairies had been opened up, and ship loads of cheap cereals were arriving at English ports, causing prices to fall. Some farmers like Calvertt were able to continue in their comfortable lifestyle despite these troubles, but many smaller farmers did not manage to survive this period of depression, and landowners were finding it hard to dispose of leases on vacant farms.

As things became genuinely difficult for farmers the labourers were forced to accept some cuts in wages, but since the cost of living had fallen their real wage was in fact still better than at the beginning of the decade. Although the period of heady agitation had died down, the villagers now had a sense of what could be achieved by co-operation. The Union lapsed, and many of the young and vigorous leaders amongst the working men had gone. Amongst those who were left was there some legacy of the independent spirit which had helped families to brave the long voyage to the other side of the world, and to risk hardship by challenging farmers for better conditions? Now in more defensive mode, it was into allotment schemes, friendly societies and chapel-going that energies flowed.

Sources and References

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