

The 'Revolt of the Field': The Devon Response

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There has been a general neglect of agrarian protest in western regions of England and Devon in particular has received scant attention in the standard works on the 'Revolt of the Field' of the 1870s. Dunlop mentions only the village of Buckland Monachorum and Dunbabin has, correctly, described Devon as an area of 'slight unionism' but without any explanation of why this might have been.¹ Writers such as Hasbach, Heath and E.W. Martin have concentrated upon the work of Canon Girdlestone at Halberton.² However, although Girdlestone with his Lancastrian pugnacity drew a lot of attention to the county there is no clear link between his activities and attempts from below to unionise in the rest of Devon. Nevertheless a brief examination of his experience is useful in illustrating the social attitudes likely to be encountered when attempts to unionise began in 1872.

Much of the debate, or frequent exchange of insults, started by Girdlestone centred on the level of a labourer's wage and the sum to be estimated for perks. Estimates in 1860 for the quarter ending Michaelmas suggest a level of 8s to 12s a week without lodging. 'A North Devonian' wrote to the local press in 1865 saying that the customary wage was 8s and that the labourer's diet was mainly bread, potatoes and cider. *The Royal Commission on Women and Children in Agriculture* in 1872 produced evidence of a weekly wage of 9s to 12s plus cider and possibly some potato ground while wage estimates for 1874 in the returns of agricultural wages indicate an improvement of 1s a week and that is the problematical gain from the 'Revolt' in the boom conditions of 1872-3. The *Liberal Devon Weekly Times* protested in 1865 'In how many places is the agricultural labourer badly housed, allowed no advantage of garden and pig, and has to maintain a wife and large family . . . on eight shillings a week! The result is semi-starvation, ignorance, poverty and vice' and a farm

labourer wrote in 1872 that 12s a week was insufficient for heavy labour of twelve hours a day in rough weather.³ As Dunbabin has pointed out rural low wage areas were not usually fertile areas for union growth.⁴

In drawing attention to low wages and in encouraging migration to the north of England Girdlestone aroused the anger of the farmers of his parish. He reckoned twenty had joined in an alliance to keep wages down and in 1867 asked 'Why should the farmers, as at Halberton, unite to keep wages down and their labourers not unite to raise them?' At the Halberton Great Tithes Audit dinner in 1866 farmer Thomas Webber angrily denounced Girdlestone, 'they never had heard a clergyman of the nineteenth century speak down to his parishioners in the way that man had done when he went into the pulpit the other Sunday and attacked them in that blackguard manner, when he told them they took more care of their cattle than their labourers. Many could not understand why he did it, but it was to make himself popular with the lower orders at the farmers' expense.' The following year Thomas Pearce, who had chaired that previous Audit, was 'decidedly of the opinion that the wages market is governed by a law which neither you nor I can control and that the course you are pursuing is . . . utterly barren of any temporal good to the labourer, it is in a much higher sense productive of evil to all classes.' The Halberton farmers disputed Girdlestone's rights over church wardenships, the use of local charities and roundly abused him at vestry meetings where on one occasion he was told he was only fit 'to carry guts to a bear'. At the Halberton Farmers' Club in 1868 Mr Roach had the general support of the meeting in feeling that 'It ill became a minister . . . to endeavour to make people dissatisfied with their station in life,' and it seems that some farmers also refused to give 'characters' to their labourers to prevent their moving.⁵

At a national level Girdlestone was to support attempts to form a national agricultural union; his attack on cider and truck gained the support of A.J. Mundella, and his letters to *The Times* gained much publicity. Locally, too, he attracted the support of the Exeter Working Men's Society when in February 1872 a cabinet maker named Pyne said that 'he pitied the poor agricultural labourers, who were ground down by hard masters, and although he agreed with such men as Canon Girdlestone, yet he thought the remedy was in the hands of the men themselves.' This was a sound suggestion; for apart from the fact the Girdlestone was soon to leave Devon and in May 1872 preached his farewell sermon at Halberton in favour of agricultural trade unionism, his attitude to unions, as Dunbabin has noted elsewhere, was very ambivalent.⁶

There was a conflict between his feelings for the labourer's plight and his paternalism as a Canon of the established church. On the anniversary of the Halberton New Friendly Society in May 1866 he had advised against unions and strikes because the cost to the labourer would be greater than any gain – 'Never combine, never strike against their master – because it would be ruinous to themselves and because the spirit of all combinations and all strikes were at variance with the spirit of love and good fellowship which is part and parcel of the gospel.' His experience with the local farmers obviously dented his belief in good fellowship. At his final tithe audit he 'urged the farmers to raise the wages of the labourers at once' but he also told them to try and mould and direct the new unions so strife was avoided. His farewell speech to the labourers supported Arch and the union but he was later to warn against association with urban liberals believing this was contrary to rural sentiment.⁷

Girdlestone had complained that 'he found no-one in Devonshire to co-operate with him.'⁸ Indeed he was much opposed by his fellow established clergy. No support was to be forthcoming from the Rev. Francis Hole of Georgeham, Barnstaple, who as a Justice gave one labourer in 1866 two weeks hard labour for breach of contract and who soon after handing out the sentence died of apoplexy. The Rector of West Buckland, the Rev. Prebendary Brereton, was a frequent writer on agricultural topics. When lecturing Barnstaple farmers' club he advised 'paying wages according to merit'. In 1872 he opposed free education 'believing that each class of the community had the means of educating its children', insisted that employers understood the labour question better than agitators and thought, 'if the differences were discussed by the two classes, the labourers would begin to see that their position was not an undesirable one.' Halberton farmers were to find the Rev. G. Hadow more to their taste when he urged the identity of interests of capital and labour and deplored strikes which were 'establishing a bad relationship between those who ought to be friends.' The Rev. R.E. Trefusis was still more accommodating to Kings Nympton farmers' club believing 'in his parish farmers and labourers lived very happily together.' He was much applauded when he suggested increased wages did not mean increased happiness. Welcome, too, were the platitudes expressed at Broadclyst Ploughing Match by Prebendary Acland who 'could not say he thought it was the duty of the clergy to go to an employer and say what wages a farmer should pay his

labourer . . . What the clergy had to do was to teach plain straightforward Christianity to both master and labourer.' More open support for the farmers came from the Rev. E. Orpen at Totnes who believed that outsiders were ignorant of the real conditions and that farmers were really anxious to promote the comfort of their labourers. No wonder that the national union was increasingly to attack the privileges of the established church.⁹

Nevertheless there are instances of Anglican support for the labourers. The Rev. Thomas Mozeley, vicar of Plymtree, gave his support to agricultural unionism and the Rector of South Tawton, Rev. J. Bliss, gave a qualified support in telling his local ploughing match that 'the labourer would be better off with more wages and less political agitation.' The social penalties facing such atypical clergy were made clear at the Colyton Agricultural Society's meeting in October 1872 which was chaired by W.T. Hallett JP. Believing that agitation was bad for both sides the Rev. M. Guernitz wanted the farmers to grant a small increase but after saying 'There was a deal of poverty and distress, and the wages in some parts were nothing like sufficient for their families to live on', he met with uproar and 'resumed his seat amid considerable confusion.' Immediately his speech was attacked by Sir Lawrence Palk who accused agitators of trying to force farmers to pay more than they could afford and interfering with the rights of property.¹⁰

Later in the campaign the *Devon Weekly Times* was to suggest that landlords and clergy should spend six months on agricultural wages. This was not a proposal likely to be welcomed by Devon landlords for although Dunlop has suggested that landlords spoke up in favour of the labourers the leaders of Devon society were almost uniformly hostile to the attempts to organise the labourers. Indeed far more speeches on the question by the aristocracy and the gentry were reported than by those of the labourers who would, it must be admitted, be in any case regarded as less newsworthy.

As in other areas the Chamber of Agriculture provided a forum, and opposition started right at the top: from the Lord Lieutenant, the Duke of Somerset. The Duke, possessor of 8,138 Devon acres, told the Chamber that labourers were better off than they used to be and gave the lead in preventing any discussion of wages. In 1873 he sarcastically asked 'instead of spending their money supporting strikes, why did they not buy up an estate or two and put it out among peasant farmers and let the people see how they would work.' The

following year sarcasm turned to alarm over the franchise issue for 'the effect of giving the whole of the agricultural population votes would be to disfranchise the present county voters – they would be overwhelmed by the multitudes . . . they must remember they had just passed a Reform Bill, and were they to go on continually bettering it?'¹¹

An early critic of Girdlestone had been the Earl of Devon (20,588 acres) and he preferred to ease the problem by granting land for allotments. Lord Portsmouth, on the other hand, thought the building of improved cottages would keep labourers tied to his 16,414 acres and he hoped for low interest state loans for that purpose. As far as wages were concerned he believed they were determined by supply and demand and that it was impossible to alter the laws of political economy. Lord Fortescue also favoured cottage building on his 20,171 acres for 'you cannot expect men to herd like pigs and live like Christians.'¹² October 1873 saw the Hon. Major L.A. Addington addressing the Stockland and Dalwood Agricultural Association, he thought labourers could only be kept by kindness but that in concentrating on cash agitators were destroying 'the feeling of confidence between farmer and labourer'. Similarly Major Troyte told Halberton farmers that they should not be bullied.¹³

Sir Stafford Northcote MP, who probably just wanted a quiet life, speaking at Awliscombe in October 1872 said labour should be treated commercially but sympathetically and that all classes should pull together. He told the Chamber that agitators talking 'clap-trap' were harming the labourer but if wages were insufficient the poor law and cottages should be improved so that 'the labourers should know that they are not to be put down merely as a troublesome people, but that their interests were being considered with a view to their adjustment with the interests of the rest of the community.' In further speeches over 1872–3 at Torrington, Petrockstowe and Awliscombe he decried agitators and class hostility and feared any wage increase would be spent on drink. At the last place he wished 'the farmers to be the leaders of the labourers and let them lead the labourers to what was good for all'; a classic paternalist goal.¹⁴ Similar hopes of 'all pulling together' were expressed by Sir John Kennaway at Newton and Chudleigh in 1873 and Colyton in 1874; he believed that if labourers were comfortable they would ignore 'agitation and not take in such trash as was put forth in the Agricultural Labourers Union Chronicle.'¹⁵

The round of October meetings contained even more forthright opponents of the National Agricultural Labourers Union (NALU). Most active in this category was Sir Lawrence Palk of Haldon House

with a substantial income, much of it from Torquay ground rents, and the possessor of 10,109 Devon acres. Wages, he said, could only be determined by supply and demand and, flying in the face of national statistics, that agricultural wages were higher in Devon than other counties. His advice to farmers was to 'continue to the labourer those numerous good offices which until evil minded men stepped in between the farmer and the labourer, exercised a beneficial result to both.' Speaking at Colyton he objected to interference with property, while at South Tawton, 'he was sorry to say that there were men going about the county spreading ill feeling between landlord and tenant and tenant and labourer.' In November 1873 at Chudleigh he wished to 'crush the cosmopolitan spirit which pervaded everyone in these days to go where he received the best pay.' He was furious with Sir Thomas Acland (see below p.170) and told the Newton Abbot Agricultural and Labourers Friendly Society that if men combined the farmers must, and 'he thought it absolute wickedness to encourage agitators to come down and talk to ignorant men' for 'the man who in this county was always grumbling at his wages, and seeking to join Unions, was the man who would shirk his work'. The farmers would always win and labourers were dupes of designing men. In late 1877 when the movement had virtually disappeared he was still telling labourers to have nothing to do with Unions and in 1878 triumphantly told the Chagford Agricultural Society that 'wages must fall and no labourers' union could stop them.'¹⁶

A keen campaigner against the interference with the rights of property, and by extension opposition to unions, was Sir Massey Lopes MP, of Maristow, with 11,977 acres held in Devon. At Totnes in 1873 he thought that too much was being made of the labourer's difficulties and that a little milk given to the labourer's wife would set her on the farmer's side. The following year at the West of England Fatstock Society Dinner he was cheered by the fact that 'strikes have been practically a failure, and I do not imagine we shall hear very much of them in the future' for 'I am sure that there is no class who will show more gratitude than the agricultural labourer' if shown a little kindness.¹⁷

The message was carried throughout the county by 'the great unpaid' as the *Devon Weekly Times* called the magistracy. J.C. Moore Stevens JP of Winscott, Torrington had been an active opponent of Girdlestone in the 1860s. William Porter of Hembury Fort was prone to emphasise the north-south urban-rural divide for he 'knew nothing more injurious, . . . than the influence of men who had come from Birmingham and Manchester in order to induce farm labourers to leave their work under the promise of being better paid

by joining a union.' Thus he appealed to the local prejudices of the Awliscombe, Feniton, Gittisham and Buckerell Ploughing Match. Sir Robert Torrens of Holnicott, Ashburton and Liberal MP for Cambridge Borough told a Totnes gathering that if labourers had increased wages they could not expect poor relief, a view echoed by John Carpenter Garnier JP. J.W. Walrond, a leading Tory of Cullompton attacked Arch's emigration schemes in 1874 as an artificial interference with market forces. The previous year John George Johnson JP attacked on two fronts at his local ploughing match at Winkleigh. 'He thought it worthwhile remembering that wages were governed by the laws of political economy, which were as astringent and little to be trifled with as the laws which regulated health' and moreover they did not want change 'for they were united and bound together by mutual interest and friendly feeling.' Whether his audience realised the innate contradiction is not recorded. C.J. Cornish of Ottery told a local Agricultural Association at Sidmouth and Sidbury in 1872 that 'he strongly condemned the stirring up by agitators, from interested motives, of dissatisfaction among labourers . . . and was sure Devon farmers did not underpay their labourers'. The following year he told his Sidmouth audience 'strikes were setting class against class, landlord against tenant, mechanics against employers and in short were upsetting the whole social system of the country.'¹⁸

There were a few of those who received gentry patronage who were more hard line than the gentry. J.D. Pratt lectured to the Devon Chamber of Agriculture in 1873 and actually deplored the movement to cash payments (for many gentry disliked the labourers' addiction to cider) because 'payment in kind kept up a wholesome feeling for mutual dependence and an interchange of kind actions.' While the medical officer of the Blacktawton Friendly Society told the annual gathering of labourers to pity the 'poor farmer.'¹⁹

Against this trend only two names stand out as clear exceptions among the greater families. The first was the largest landlord in Devon with 45,088 acres and a gross rental in 1873 of £70,586, the Hon. Mark Rolle. He was a retiring person not given to speeches and we have to assume that his steward, Mr Lipscombe, speaks with his authority. In January 1873 Lipscombe felt that 'Everything had risen in price, and if the labourer ever needed an extra shilling it was now' and reported that Rolle had increased wages by a shilling which would help keep strikes and agitators out of the county. He also advised the labourers to be cautious at harvest time or farmers would lay them off in the winter. So here was a mixture of expediency and threat. There was also, however, a real concern that the low wages

and poor housing of the county were driving away labourers. Rolle was rapidly renovating and building cottages, for as Lipscombe pointed out 'If lads saw only the prospect of subsistence in their years of strength, and parish relief in their old age was it astonishing that they ran away from it, and from the dear old county.' There were few young labourers left on the Rolle estate and at the end of 1872 the average age 'was considerably beyond fifty years old.' This probably led to a cycle of low wages and low physical efficiency noted, for example, for Wiltshire by E.H. Hunt.²⁰

The second was the head of that always independently idiosyncratic family, the Aclands. Sir Thomas Acland, addressing the Torrington Agricultural Society in May 1872, wanted labourers fairly remunerated in cash (not cider) and 'hoped that the farmers of Devon would not commit the mistake made in Warwickshire where labourers were turned out of employment because they joined unions. The men had a right to combine . . .' In October he told his local Broadclyst Agricultural Association that it had not been formed to and would not 'attempt to keep down wages'. At the following autumn's ploughing match he praised the labourers' restraint at harvest time but added that a man could only get what he was worth, regardless of combination and thought that if wages rose they could expect less by way of poor relief or charity. After a shilling increase had been granted he thought 'the Union has had little to do with the advance'. He said 'I fully admit the right of the labourers to combine with a view to their getting a larger share of the wealth of the country, whether that share is to come out of profits or rent.' However, he did not think in the long run wages could be raised above the value of the work done and in 1876 after the collapse of prices he felt there was 'a real danger lest the produce of the land now available for the labourer should be diminished by an artificial attempt to force up wages beyond their productive value'. Despite these doubts Sir Thomas was the only landlord to encourage union meetings and not to oppose membership.²¹

A remarkably acute social analysis was put forward by James Buller, a near relation of the national hero, in 1874, 'The real fact is, however, that the day for holding labourers in leading strings has passed away, that they prefer to go alone, and not to be compelled to live in a state of perpetual tutelage, under a sense of everlasting obligation to their employers.'²² Support for a wage increase for the labourers came from Joshua Dixon JP of Clyst St Mary and W.R. Coleridge of Ottery St Mary,²³ but only James Buller attained that level of analysis.

The fears of the gentry were fed by the rising risk of contagion as the epidemic spread into neighbouring counties. The Liberal *Western Times* in January 1872 welcomed the fact that Midlands labourers were speaking out and in the following months carried reports from there, Cheshire and Oxfordshire. Girdlestone's unwelcome letter to the labourers of Stoneleigh in Warwickshire advising them not to strike as they had 15s compared to the Devon labourers' 8 to 9s was given prominence and a stream of reports continued till the union's collapse in 1874. By April 1872 agitation was reported as advancing down to Dorset, at Shaftesbury and Blandford, and to Taunton Deane Manor in Somerset. There were also rumours that labourers were being recruited in Devon and Dorset as strike-breakers for the Midlands. With a deal of exaggeration the *Western Times* leader of 3 May 1872 announced 'The wage question is rolling over Devonshire'. Both that paper and the Tory *Exeter Flying Post* thought that, at that stage, the problem could be solved by improved cottages but while the *Western Times* welcomed the organisation of the labourers the *Flying Post* only grudgingly accepted that the labourers had the right to organise 'as other classes do' but only if it did not involve 'the interference with the question by professional agitators' and 'arbitrary' union rules: the two perennial objections to union organisation in itself.²⁴

Optimistically the *Western Times* had pronounced 'the men have a perfect right to combine and the farmers cannot successfully resist it.' That was not the general view of the farmers, though there were a couple of exceptions. A significantly anonymous 'North Devon farmer' wrote to the *Flying Post* in January 1872 hoping that farmers would adopt Sir Thomas Acland's new scale of 12s a week with cottage rent at 2s and 1½d a quart for the weekly allowance of cider while in November 1873 the secretary of the Sowton Agricultural Association claimed he 'found no more difficulty in paying 14s a week now than he did to pay 7s a week twenty years ago.'²⁵

Outright opposition to the union was more typical; on the question of a wage increase there was a wider spectrum of views from compromise to rejection. Most farmers believed that critics underestimated the labourer's total earnings. Mr Wade told the Devon Chamber that 'the agricultural labourer [in Devon] got as much in proportion to his work as did any other district' while John Griffin of Broadclyst and George Turner who farmed near Tiverton thought the perks were undervalued, that 10 quarts of cider a week,

for example, were worth 2s. The likes of Girdlestone, said Turner, only made the labourers 'unhappy and discontented'. When farmer Thomas Webber of Halberton died in 1872 he had stuck to 'seven shillings a week and privileges' with cottages and gardens for as long as he could and thought of Girdlestone as 'both revolutionary and unchristian.' At a meeting of the chamber in June 1872 Mr Troode, who employed ten labourers, thought conditions of service were 'very much in favour of the labourer' and at Burrington that same month a meeting of tenant farmers in the parish school room deplored 'the disposition of townspeople to encourage discontent in the minds of the labourers and to aid them in strikes.'²⁶

The pressure that could be placed upon a labourer by a hostile farmer with a supporting magistrate is illustrated in the case of John Webber who had been persuaded to migrate to Lancashire by Girdlestone and who having sold his furniture and vacated his cottage and given a week's notice, was in May 1872 arrested for breach of contract. Farmer White of Holcombe Rogus claimed there was a verbal agreement to an annual contract although there were no witnesses to it. Despite evidence that Webber was normally paid fortnightly and had been paid the week owing by White, the bench fined Webber £2 and costs. The Chairman of the bench at Tiverton also took the opportunity to attack Girdlestone who was in court and threatened labourers that any future breach of contract could lead to a £20 fine. Girdlestone was quick to point out to the press that one of the justices was the farmer's landlord and two others were in neighbouring parishes. There was, however, nothing unusual in that.²⁷

By September 1872 the Liberal press was suggesting that 'the farmers are so disgusted with the "unreasonable" conduct of the labourers that they will vote against the Liberal candidates at the next election in order to keep down the aspirations of the labourer to be enfranchised.' A correspondent from Harbertonford reported that in forty years he had never known the labourers 'so perfectly masters of the labour market' and in October farmers feared that 'the minds of some of the labourers will be excited by designing persons' and that labourers would have to be laid off because of the high summer wages. At a farmers' dinner at Okehampton Mr Gibbings of Clannaborough claimed his labourers were then earning, with perks, 15s a week.²⁸

Devon farmers shared the belief of other counties that their troubles were inspired by 'foreign' agitators. E. Ford told a farmers' meeting at Newton Abbot 'They did not want the interference of these agitators who only made a living out of the labourers'; Mr Lee

of Dawlish reported 'agitators' in his neighbourhood and Mr Wills thought the labourers 'did not know how well off they were till they left the farmers'. The Chudleigh Association agreed with Mr Wolland's opinion that 'the labourers had been entirely deceived by agitators running about the county . . . He did not believe these agitators bothered what the poor labourers got so long as they succeeded in filling their own pockets.' The views of Thorverton farmers were made quite plain in 1876. After a labourer's meeting at which several farmers were present, and very noisy, they held their own meeting in the parish school room. The farmers resolved unanimously:

1. that this meeting, being of the opinion that farmers generally of this district are willing to pay their labourers fairly for the labour they perform, strongly disapprove of persons going about the county villages holding meetings and endeavouring to cause dissention between the labourers and employers
2. that this meeting is of the opinion that no labourer should be taken into employment until a reference is made to his late employer

Similar action had been taken by Tiverton farmers in 1872 when they decided to discharge any man who joined the union.²⁹

In the face of this denunciation by aristocracy, gentry and farmers, what actually happened? Both Dunbabin and Charlesworth have stressed the essentially local nature of rural protest at this time and such considerations are equally applicable to Devon.³⁰ The information is usually of small meetings in small villages in the comforting security of dusk or dimly lit rooms. The majority of labourers' meetings so far discovered occur between April 1872 and January 1873 with diminished activity in 1874, the year which saw the failure of the national movement. There was a revival in 1876 which is principally composed of activity in Sir Thomas Acland's domain and in other areas is merely the remnants of a dying movement.³¹ Early reports of discontent in Devon mirror the chronology of other counties. In Warwickshire activity begins in February 1872 and the National Union was formed in May; March and April see meetings in Oxfordshire, in Lincolnshire and Kent and closer to Devon, in Dorchester. There is no clear evidence of a westward spread of contagion from Somerset or Dorset. If we take the period from April 1872 to January 1873 Molland, Tiverton and Halberton are in the east

of the county but Lamerton, Buckland Monachorum, Modbury, Kingsbridge and South Milton lie further west closest to the Cornish boundary. In addition incidents occur in the middle of the county at Crediton, Exeter, Ide, Ottery and North Tawton. The timing of these meetings shows no evidence of westward drift.

The first report of any activity, in April 1872, is of a Molland labourer of twenty years service with a large farmer striking to get his wages increased from 7s a week because of the dearth of necessities.³² Later in April it was reported that the NALU was intending to hold meetings in Devon and about sixty labourers met in the Modbury Inn. The meeting was chaired by Edward Vincent and it was reported that some farmers were willing to give 13s, an advance of 2s, but the men wanted 14s. A second meeting in May was attended 'both by farmers and their men.' One labourer, Francis Davis, reported he had been offered an extra 1s and others reported that their farmers would follow the general decision of other farmers. One radical proposed a strike 'and if they could not live, let them go into a field and take a sheep or a bullock and share it between them.' The meeting decided it still wanted 14s, but would settle for 13s and threatened to strike. The strike threat proved illusory and soon after 12s was accepted with the usual perk of 3 pints of cider a day and that seems to have been accepted as the going rate in neighbouring parishes. The men also decided to form a union; in June a few of the more determined assembled at the Modbury Inn and 'a score' joined and a treasurer was elected but no-one was willing to fill the other offices.³³

Also in April 1872 North Tawton labourers were seeking a 1s increase to 12s plus privileges. The farmers met the next month but seem unlikely to have given an increase. If they did it was soon removed for in 1874 12s was still the labourers' aim when 150 of them met in the Market Square. In May 1872 a Crediton farmer was offering his men 15s, without perks but they refused to part with their cider. That same month reports occur of demands for higher wages in Kingsbridge, South Milton and in Newton St Cyres where wages were said to be 10s plus cider.³⁴ In a dimly lit skittle alley at the Rising Sun Inn, Buckland Monachorum 'upward of 100' labourers heard William Dawe, a Torre labourer, advocate a union and add 'We must not lay all the blame on the masters, because we know very well they are greatly pressed by the landlords and upper classes.' A committee was appointed to form a union (and it was also reported that nearby Meavy was organising). By June discontent had spread to nearby Lamerton where the committee of the schoolroom, dominated by farmers, refused its use to the labourers. Instead they met outside the

Fortescue Arms using an old door 'placed appropriately on top of a grinding stone.' Again William Dawe addressed them and after two and a half hours, and an hour's delay in starting, it was resolved to form a union.³⁵

In July 1872 attention was switched to Ottery St Mary. A previous attempt to hold a meeting had been a failure when only 'a few rough boys' appeared; in July, despite announcements by town crier only two men attended at the Lamb and Flag. Not until January 1873 was a successful meeting held and addressed by William Poole of Cullompton. The discussion was almost all political and no one was willing to join the union on the spot so the chairman, David Roberts, offered to take any subscriptions at his home in Ottery. Few attended yet another meeting in 1877.³⁶

William Poole chaired a larger meeting at Halberton in July 1872 where the principal speaker was Edward Haynes of the NALU: 'many' were enrolled in the union. Poole also chaired a meeting outside Tiverton when he declared 'Labour was the source of all wealth, and it was now high time that the labourers should be better paid and more dignified' and while admitting farmers had their burdens he suggested they should get rid of the game laws and secure tenant right. Haynes urged 'the battle between capital and labour'. After the meeting local farmers decided to dismiss anyone who joined the union. Thereafter there is a reduction in the level of activity, admittedly never very high, as many farmers bought off conflict with the concession of a 1s increase. In all probability this was withdrawn over 1874-5 as there is some evidence of wage reductions and when addressing labourers at Bideford Joseph Arch told them 'if the men were fully aware of the power that was in their hands they would never have submitted to reductions in their wages.'³⁷

A subsidiary movement to recruit labourers was started in 1873 by the 'Bristol, West of England and South Wales General Labourers' Union' which sent delegates to Exeter where a branch was formed. An Exeter builder's labourer, Ponsford, spoke at that inaugural meeting and also chaired a meeting of agricultural and other labourers at the Bridge Inn, Ide, and the following year at the Railway Hotel at Starcross where 80 labourers attended. This Union, however, was apparently predominantly urban based.³⁸

Although the Broadclyst estates do not seem to have attracted initial attention from recruiters Sir Thomas's relative impartiality permitted later success. In October 1874 he made the Broadclyst schoolroom available for a meeting addressed by George Mitchell of the NALU and William Poole of Cullompton. Labourers at the meeting told of receiving 10s or 11s and cider but were much

interrupted by a large number of farmers at the back of the room. Acland himself attended and closed the meeting with a speech which suggested he had little faith in the utility of trade unions. In a letter to his brother Henry on 25 October 1874 Sir Thomas confided his motives for attending the meeting:

I intended if possible, to say almost nothing. But I was partly won over by the generosity and Christian earnestness of the men, and partly influenced by necessity . . . of entering some protest against monstrous rhetoric. My chief wish was to hold our farmers in hand and prevent them acting foolishly; in this I succeeded. The second was to disarm ill feeling against our class.

He did not feel that the power of unions was likely to be great in rural areas and hoped that by showing a personal interest in the question the labourers would sympathise with his opinions.

However, by November 1875 it was estimated that 40 had joined the Broadclyst branch and S. Pike, its secretary, toured surrounding villages. At Poltimore the police had to be called as the meeting was so rowdy. The following year Pike continued to hold regular meetings at Broadclyst, Pinhoe and Colyton. At one meeting of that regular series, for example, few appeared at first but when the sky was nearly dark more gained confidence and about a hundred heard the speeches. The greatest applause came when Pike said 'no working man should have an allotment of less than an acre.' At Colyton he was applauded for attacking the truck system. Thanks to the forbearance of Sir Thomas Acland Pike's Broadclyst branch seems to have been the most successful with 60 members claimed and subsidiary branches at Poltimore, Pinhoe, Ottery, Thorverton and Crediton. In so far as the union survived in Devon it appears very much to be through the efforts of Pike of Broadclyst and Poole of Cullompton.³⁹

Speakers at meetings, seeing the economic failure of the movement, increasingly turned their attention to the political matters, to the vote. *The Devon Weekly Times* approved, believing the result would be 'to get rid of the landowners' domination which makes the farmers vassals, and labourers serfs which imposes and maintains the abominable game laws and fines and imprisons the poor labouring man for killing a rabbit which is devouring the produce of his garden.' There was, however, a blacker possibility of resort to traditional forms of protest. At Kings Nympton in 1881 an old labourer called

Buckingham was killed by some roughs. Shortly afterwards a note was fixed to the door of the parish church: 'Notice to farmers about dropping wages for first that drops them will drop as Buckingham did, and freshcomers be very careful and be careful of the machinery and reed comers'.⁴⁰

The principal reasons for the failure of the 'Revolt of the Field' in Devon may now be indicated. The very isolation of the county and its relatively small size of farming units were an obvious hindrance but so too was the scarcity of urban craft trade union branches which might have added support. Trade unionism in the urban centres of Exeter and Plymouth was weak, in north Devon it was practically non-existent. The considerable hostility of the aristocracy, gentry and farmers hampered the labourers' cause. So too did the lack of political figures of national standing such as Mundella or Morley who would arouse support from the Midlands. In addition where discontent was expressed it appears to have been quickly subdued by either the offer of a 1s or the united action of the farmers as employers. A low wage area with little alternative employment was stony ground for building unionism. As a result of the failure of the 'seventies there seems to have been no revival of unionism in the last decade of the century for the *Western Times* and the *Devon Weekly Times* provide no indication of meetings.

Notes

¹ O.J. Dunlop, *The Farm Labourer* (1913), p. 144; A. Charlesworth *An Atlas of Rural Protest in Britain 1548-1900* (1983), p. 172.

² W. Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (1920), p. 412; E.W. Martin, *The Secret People* (1955), p. 167-9; F.G. Heath, *The English Peasantry* (1874), p. 155; P. Horn, *Joseph Arch* (Kington), 1971, pp. 26-7.

³ *Devon Weekly Times* (DWT), 10 Nov., 1 Dec. 1865, *Western Times* (WT), 16 April, 1872, 19 May 74; *Return of Wages*. C 5172, 1887, p. 412. Heath, op.cit. pp. 99-100; Hasbach op.cit., p.284; *Exeter Flying Post* (EFP) 17 Jan 1872.

⁴ J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'The incidence and organisation of Agricultural trade unionism in the 1870s', *Agricultural History Review* p' 220, xvi (1968), p. 114.

⁵ DWT, 6 June 1866, 29 March, 24 May, 4, 11 Oct., 14 June 1867, 30 Oct. 1868; Heath, op.cit., pp. 145-6.

⁶ WT, 16 Jan., 12 April, 7 May, 23 Feb. 1872; Heath, op.cit., pp. 156-7.

⁷ J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'The Revolt of the Field', *Past and Present*, no. 26 (1963), p.84; Dunbabin, *AHR*, xvi, p. 136; Horn, op.cit., pp. 54-71. DWT 10, 24, 31 May 1872; WT, 28 Jan. 1873, DWT, 25 May 1866.

⁸ WT, 7 May 1873. He was, however, supported by the eminent public figure Sir John Bowring, *DWT*, 25 Oct. 1867, 20 March 1868.

⁹ *DWT*, 2 Nov. 1866; *WT*, 30 Jan. 1872, 16 Sept. 28 Oct., 4, 7 Nov. 1873; Brereton 'On education as connected with agriculture', *Journal of Royal Society for Agriculture*, 25, 1864, pp. 59–76, 'On Stocking Land', *JRSA*, 1, 1865, pp. 130–41. Dunlop op.cit., p. 149; Hasbach, op.cit., p. 292.

¹⁰ *WT*, 28 May, 25 Oct. 1872; *DWT*, 31 May, 19 Nov. 1872.

¹¹ *WT*, 23 Jan. 14 May 1872, 1 Jan. 1873, 16 Jan. 1874; Dunlop, op.cit., p. 155; Dunbabin, *Past and Present*, 1963, p. 74. All land holdings are from *Return of Owners of Land* 1873, Vol. 1, 1875, C.1097, Devon.

¹² *DWT*, 23 Nov. 1866; *WT*, 30 Jan. 1872, 18 Feb. 1873, 9 Jan., 14 April, 30 Oct. 1874. Heath, op.cit., p. 232.

¹³ *WT*, 21 Oct. 1872, 21 Oct. 1873.

¹⁴ *WT*, 22 Oct. 1872, 1 Jan., 6 May, 14, 17, 21 Oct. 1873.

¹⁵ *WT*, 24 Oct., 7 Nov. 1873, 23 Oct. 1874.

¹⁶ *WT*, 18, 25 Oct., 19 Nov. 1872, 7 Nov. 1873, 23, 30 Oct. 1874, 9 Oct. 1877, 15 Nov. 1878.

¹⁷ *WT*, 4 Nov. 1873, 18 Dec. 1874.

¹⁸ *DWT*, 3 Jan. 1868; *WT*, 1 Nov. 1872, 17, 21, 24 Oct., 7 Nov. 1873, 16 Jan. 1874; *Dod's Parliamentary Companion*, 1872.

¹⁹ *WT*, 28 May 1872, 31 Jan. 1873.

²⁰ *WT*, 3 Dec. 1872, 24 Jan. 1873; E.H. Hunt, 'Labour productivity in English Agriculture 1850–1914', *Ec.H.R.*, xx (1967), pp. 280–92; on the reality of depopulation in the south west see J. Saville, *Rural Depopulation in England and Wales 1851–1951*, (1957), p. 68.

²¹ *WT*, 7 May, 29 Oct. 1872, 7 Nov. 1873, 3 Oct. 1874, 28 April 1876.

²² *DWT*, 8 May 1874. Redvers Buller was awarded the VC in June 1879 during the Zulu wars, C.H. Melville, *Life of Gen. the Rt. Hon. Sir Redvers Buller* (1923), pp. 118–24.

²³ *WT*, 1 Oct. 1872, 4 Nov. 1873.

²⁴ *WT*, 9 Jan., 19, 22, 28 March, 2, 16, 23 April, 3 May 1872, 5 April, 4, 25 Aug., 29 Nov. 1874; *EFP*, 8 May, 26 June 1872.

²⁵ *WT*, 9 April 1872, 72, 4 Nov. 1873. 1871–3 were profitable years for Devon, P.J. Perry, 'Where was the great Agricultural Depression?', *A.H.R.*, xx (1972), p. 33.

²⁶ *WT*, 23 Jan., 4 April, 10, 14 May, 4, 7 June 1872.

²⁷ *WT*, 11, 18, 28 June 1872; *DWT*, 7, 21 June 1872; Heath, op.cit., pp. 167–72.

²⁸ *WT*, 3 Sept. 11 Oct. 29 Nov. 24 Dec. 1872.

²⁹ *WT*, 2 Aug. 1872, 24 Oct. 1873, 6 Nov. 1874, 23 June, 26 July 1876; Dunbabin, *Past and Present*, 1963, p. 87.

³⁰ Ibid and Charlesworth, op.cit., p. 173; J.P. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in nineteenth century Britain* (1974), pp. 76–9.

³¹ Hasbach, op.cit., p. 285; Charlesworth, op.cit., p. 164. Dunbabin, op.cit., pp. 75, 80, 86–7; Heath, op.cit., pp. 193–201.

³² *WT*, 2 April 1872.

³³ *WT*, 16, 26 April, 7, 10 May, 14 June 1872; *EFP*, 8 May 1872. *DWT*, 10 May 1872.

³⁴ *WT*, 26 April, 10, 17, 31 May 1872, 27 March 1874; *DWT*, 10 May 1872.

³⁵ *WT*, 30 April, 4 June 1872; *DWT*, 10 May 1872.

³⁶ *EFP*, 21 June, 23, 30 July, 1872, 25 July 1877; *DWT*, 31 Jan. 1873.

³⁷ *WT*, 30 July 1872, 2, 6 Aug. 1872, 6 June 1874.

³⁸ *WT*, 26 Aug. 28 Nov. 1873, 3 March 1874.

³⁹ *DWT*, 23 Oct. 1874, 11 Feb. 1876; *EFP*, 19 April 1876; *DWT*, 21 April, 23 June 1876. Arthur D. Acland, *Memoir and letters of the Rt. Hon. Sir Thomas Dyke Acland* (1902), p. 317.

⁴⁰ *DWT*, 10 Sept. 1875, 25 Feb. 1881.