

THE CONDITION OF THE ENGLISH PEASANTRY

A Description in 1829

A CORRESPONDENT has drawn our attention to an article under this title in the *Quarterly Review* for July 1829, written by Samuel Banfill. One purpose of the article was to combat the view that the condition of the rural population was due to the Poor Law, and show that the Poor Law was the consequence of the dispossession of the people from the soil. Our space does not permit us to reproduce it in full, but the following extracts will indicate its scope. The crossheads have been inserted.

During the prevalence of the feudal system, from the period of the Conquest to the accession of Henry VII, the population of this country was purely agricultural. The barons and chief landed proprietors possessed a certain number of slaves, who were employed generally in domestic offices, and in the manual fabrication of the wearing apparel and household furniture which they required; and who, like the negroes of the West India Islands, were, during infancy and old age, maintained at the expense of their owners. There was no ground, however, for thinking that this class was at any period very considerable in this country. The great body of the peasantry was composed—first, of persons who rented small farms, seldom exceeding twenty or thirty acres, and who paid their rent either in kind or in agricultural labour and services performed on the demesne of the landlord; secondly, of cottagers, each of whom had a small croft or parcel of land attached to his dwelling, and the privilege of turning out a cow, or pigs, or a few sheep, into the woods, commons and wastes of the manor.

During the whole of this period the entire population of England derived its subsistence immediately from the land; the landowner from the produce of his demesne, cultivated partly by his domestic slaves, but principally by the labour of the tenants and cottiers attached to the manor; the tenants from the produce of their little farms; and the cottiers from that of their cows and crofts, except while working upon the demesne, when they were generally fed by the landlord. The mechanics of each village, not having time to cultivate a sufficient quantity of land to yield them a maintenance, received annually a fixed allowance of agricultural produce from each tenant. When the population increased, and a new couple required accommodation, a cottage or a farmhouse, according to the circumstances of the parties, was built, and a proportionate allotment abstracted from the common.

The condition of the peasantry of this country resembled, in many respects, that of the Highland peasantry at a much more recent period. Every married peasant occupied some portion of land, and enjoyed a right of common; no class of persons existed, either engaged solely in manufactures, or subsisting solely upon the wages of daily labour. These peasantry, it is true, worked hard, and fared scantily enough; but still they were never in absolute want of food—never dependent upon charity. The whole body was poor, but it contained no paupers.

BEGINNINGS OF ENCLOSURES

In the course of the fourteenth century, the demand for wool, to supply not only the markets of the Netherlands, but also the infant manufactures of our country, rapidly increased. This circumstance brought about an important change in the distribution of the population; the owners of land, finding sheep feeding more profitable than husbandry, commenced the same

system which we have all witnessed in full operation in the Highlands of Scotland. The peasantry previously employed in tillage were turned adrift upon the world; the allotments of arable land which had afforded them and their families the means of subsistence were inclosed, consolidated and converted into sheep walks; and the policy of Henry VII greatly accelerated a social revolution which had commenced before his accession. The misery and suffering which this change of system inflicted upon the ejected peasantry have been depicted in beautiful and glowing language by Sir Thomas More, in his *Utopia*.

The suppression of monasteries by Henry VIII is frequently represented as the cause of much of the misery which prevailed among the labouring classes at that period; but the effect of this measure upon the condition of the poor is grossly exaggerated. It ought to be recollected that the monasteries fed only those who were poor and idle already; whereas the engrossing system made thousands idle who had formerly been industrious. We see, moreover, from Sir T. More himself, that many of the monastic establishments had themselves adopted the new system; "Holy Abbots" also, he distinctly says, had cleared away and discarded their little tenantry to make room for sheep.

The customs and arrangements of most manors presented, however, at that period, certain obstacles to the full expansion of the grazing system. The only parts of the manor which then lay at the absolute disposal of the lord were the land which he occupied for his own demesne, and the small farms which he let in severalty to tenants at will: and there remained in every parish a considerable extent of common field and waste land, occupied by a numerous body of small freeholders or copyholders, whom he could neither eject nor deprive of their common rights. At this point, therefore, the depopulating process was constrained to pause; and during the crisis which ensued many of the ejected tenantry and cottiers found an asylum on the lands of the small freeholders and copyholders of the district.

LANDLESS PEASANTS AND THE POOR LAW

Moved sometimes by feelings of humanity, more generally, perhaps, by the high rents wherewith they were tempted, the lesser proprietors permitted the tenants and cottiers expelled from the larger estates turned into sheepwalks to erect their huts upon some vacant corner, and occupy a fragment of their little farms. Here, therefore, the discarded peasantry experienced some alleviation of the calamity which had befallen them—some refuge from the social storm which had driven them from the homes of their forefathers. Another portion of these unfortunate outcasts found a new source of employment in the various branches of manufactures which were then rising into importance. A very considerable proportion of the discarded occupiers were thus absorbed; but the remainder, amounting, as it appears from all the records of the period, to no inconsiderable number, either unable to find a small spot of land to rent and occupy or unwilling to submit to the confinement of towns and manufactories, became wandering beggars, infesting the roads and villages of the country.

Hence the English Poor Laws. During this memorable period in the history of our peasantry, various laws were enacted for the suppression of vagrancy; and these were finally amended and consolidated in the

celebrated Act of 43 Elizabeth. There is reason to believe that they were very effectual in accomplishing the purposes for which they were enacted; and that, through their operation, the effects of the thinnings and clearings of estates, and of the substitution of pasturage for tillage under the Tudor dynasty, had, by the close of the seventeenth century, in a great degree disappeared. Until the commencement of the last century, the parochial funds of this country were expended solely upon orphan and destitute children, or upon aged and infirm persons totally unable to work; but never upon able-bodied labourers in want of employment.

INCREASING DEPOPULATION

But another revolution was now approaching—and one which has affected their welfare more extensively, as well as more intensely, than even the momentous change wrought under the dominion of the Tudors. The numerous small farms which had escaped consolidation, and consequently supplied an asylum for the peasantry discarded from the larger estates, were now doomed to undergo a similar revolution.

In 1709, an application was made to Parliament for an Act to divide and inclose the common fields and wastes belonging to the parish of Ropley. This served as an encouragement and example; and applications of the same kind became annually more frequent. It appears that, since that period, very nearly four thousand bills of inclosure have been passed, and it is also well known that, in numerous instances, the same end has been reached without legislative interference, but private agreement among the parties interested. In a word, we have scarcely a doubt that about five thousand parishes (a moiety of the whole territory of England) have been subjected to the operation of these measures in the space of about one hundred and twenty years.

Here, no doubt, it will be observed that in every instance an allotment of land was, on the division of the waste, assigned to the owners of common rights; and that an allotment in severalty, if properly attended to and cultivated, must have proved much more valuable to the cottager than what he had lost. If such had been the case, we readily admit that the division could not have proved detrimental to him; but unfortunately this very rarely happened. These allotments were assigned under Inclosure Acts, not to the occupier, but the owner of the cottage; few cottages were in the occupation of their owners; they generally, indeed, we may say universally, belonged to the proprietors of the neighbouring farms, and the allotments granted in lieu of the extinguished common rights were generally added to the large farms, and seldom attached to the cottages. The cottages which were occupied by their owners had, of course, allotments attached to them; but these have by degrees passed by sale into the hands of some large proprietor in the neighbourhood. De facto, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, the allotment has been detached from the cottage and thrown into the occupation of some adjoining farmer.

LOSS OF COMMON RIGHTS

In the year 1762, the commons and wastes belonging to the parish of Snettisham, in Norfolk, were divided and inclosed; at that period, forty-one cottagers were found entitled to common rights; and in lieu of each right three acres of land were assigned in severalty. These allotments were gradually taken away from the cottages and thrown into the adjoining farms. In 1804, only ten cottagers remained in the parish occupying land; each of these had from two to ten acres; on this they grew turnips, barley, wheat, and kept cows:

and from the period of the inclosure in 1762 down to 1804, no instance occurred in which any of those who thus occupied small allotments of land had been relieved by the parish, while those who had lost their allotments had become regular pensioners. The parish of Abington Pigots, in Cambridgeshire, was inclosed in 1770.

REFUSAL TO ACCEPT POOR RELIEF

Before the inclosure every poor man had a cow; some by right, others by sufferance; the whole parish was then the property of one individual: on the inclosure, the owners of common rights had allotments assigned to them; but they were soon severed from the cottages and thrown into the adjoining farms. Before the inclosure no poor-rates had been levied—the inhabitants having had much pains to find out an old woman, who would consent to take sixpence a week in order that they might escape the operation of that clause of the 43d of Elizabeth, which renders a parish, having no poor of its own, liable to be assessed in aid of some adjoining one. The present inhabitants of Abington Pigots are perfectly free from the dilemma which embarrassed their predecessors; they find it no longer necessary to hunt for objects of relief. Ever since the allotments were taken away from the cottagers, the poor-rates have been gradually increasing, and they now bear a very large proportion to the rental.

[Mr. Banfill then described the growth of poverty and the depopulation by the same courses, in the parishes of Shotesbrook and Waltham St. Lawrence in Berks, in North Creek, near Burnham, in Norfolk, in Lidlington in Bedford, with an amusing account of the difficulty the parish of Shotesbrook had in 1700 of finding anyone willing to accept poor-relief, so that the parish would escape liability under the clause of the Act of Elizabeth above-mentioned—but in 1717 a new owner took away orchards and lands from cottagers, adding them to his own property, demolishing many small farm houses and cottages; those who were allowed to remain became paupers dependent upon the parish for relief.]

A SUSSEX PARISH

In the parish of Clapham, in Sussex, there is a farm called Holt: it contains one hundred and sixty acres, and is now in the occupation of one tenant. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it seems to have been a hamlet in which there were at least twenty-one proprietors of land: we have now lying before us twenty-one distinct conveyances of land in fee, described to be parcels of this hamlet. These documents are in a state of perfect preservation, and bear various dates between the years 1200 and 1400. In 1400 the number of proprietors began to decrease; by the year 1520 it had been reduced to six; in the reign of James I the six were reduced to two, and soon after the restoration of Charles II the whole became the property of one owner, who let it as one farm to one occupier. The population resident on this farm, and subsisting upon its produce, between 1200 and 1400, could not have been much less than one hundred persons; the number of persons immediately connected with the tillage of this farm, at the present time, does not probably amount to forty; and—supposing ten of them to belong to the farmer's family—there are thirty persons deriving no part of their subsistence from the land—except as wages of daily labour.

Taking the history of property in this parish as an illustration of the changes which took place contemporaneously in other districts, we are led to the conclusion that the system of consolidating landed property began

to come into operation about the close of the fourteenth century ; and that it has proceeded gradually and steadily on its course until it has at length reached a point which is not to be considered without the most serious reflections. It is also a matter of history that complaints against vagrancy and idleness, and the difficulty of providing for the poor, began for the first

time to be heard in this country about the commencement of the fifteenth century ; and that these burdens and complaints have, from that period down to the present time, regularly kept pace with the progress of the system of consolidating farms, and abstracting his crofts, curtilages and common rights from the English cottager.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

UNITED STATES

The Campaign in Michigan

Very important among the resolutions adopted at the Henry George Congress in Toronto this year was the approval of the plan for a "national programme of action," selecting one State for concentrated activity. The plan had been discussed at the Detroit Congress in 1937 and a Committee with Mr A. Laurence Smith as chairman was charged with the duty of working it out. Mr Smith reported that the Tax Relief Association Inc. had since been organized and it was decided to concentrate activities in the State of Michigan, which was selected because (1) it presents both a manufacturing and an agricultural problem, (2) its problems affect similar interests in other States, (3) the population is not concentrated in a small area, (4) its total population is not so large that it cannot be reached at a reasonable expense.

The appointed officers of the Tax Relief Association are : A. Laurence Smith, Detroit, President ; G. M. Tucker, New York, Vice-President ; Warren S. Blauvelt, Secretary, Troy, N.Y. ; Otto Cullman, Chicago, Treasurer ; a board of directors, nine members from various States ; with Lt-Col V. A. Rule, Executive Secretary, 180 West Washington Street, Chicago. This is the National Organization, and for the work now being undertaken in Michigan itself, the *Tax Relief Association of Michigan* has its office at 2460 East Grand Boulevard, Detroit.

The plan is to go direct to the public through simple newspaper advertisements, pamphlets, radio, speakers, etc., for a period of about three years, in the belief that at the end of that time an informed electorate will support and carry a Constitutional Amendment whereby taxes on improvements, on personal property and on articles of consumption can be abolished and taxation concentrated on the value of land.

The educational campaign, with regard to newspaper publicity, is brilliantly described in an artistically produced book giving the texts of the advertisements with their remarkably telling cuts and illustrations, and an effective story every time to explain the present methods of taxation, with often caustic or humorous observations on their absurdity as well as their injustice. With such advertisements, so well pointing the moral that land values are the source from which revenues ought to come, very much should be achieved—given of course that the funds for the purpose are made available. We heartily wish Mr A. Laurence Smith and his associates such success in their endeavours that eventually public opinion will insist upon the necessary constitutional amendment, while the effect of the educational work done will spread also far beyond the boundaries of Michigan.

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TASMANIA

The Government recently passed a Bill authorising a private Company to construct a traffic bridge across the Derwent River estuary between Hobart and Lindisfarne, a suburb on the eastern shore. Total cost will be about £400,000 and the Company is to have sole right to vehicular passenger traffic across the Bridge and within a certain radius beyond, also the right to charge tolls on all traffic across the bridge. This for 30 years. During this period the Government is to pay the Company about £9,000 per annum towards the purchase of the bridge (this out of public taxation), the Government to take over the 30 years' old bridge for a total of £270,000, while the Company expects to make about £17,000 per annum profits to distribute to its shareholders besides paying interest and sinking fund in the 30 years on £300,000 borrowed from a local Insurance Company.

The Company also secured for about £19,000 an area of valuable building land of about 600 acres in the choicest position that will be served by the bridge. As a land speculation, they expect to realize about half a million from future home makers and others who will wish to live in the locality when made accessible by the bridge. The locality itself is naturally attractive, but lacks a water supply. This will be provided by the Government, at the general taxpayers' expense, and the benefit of it presented free gratis to the Company. The bridge has been started about three months ago and the Hobart side approach is partly built.

Public meetings of protest have been held, and the Government urged to take over the building of the bridge itself through the Public Works Department, and defray the interest and sinking fund of the cost by collecting the increased land values, not only of the 600 acres, but of all areas served by the bridge. The Premier, the Hon A. G. Ogilvie, K.C., who personally dominates his Cabinet, has evaded all representations made to him on the subject by saying that the people are going to get the bridge for nothing, as a private Company will build it and give it to the Government when they have cleared their own costs.

FRANCE

The latest issue of the quarterly *Terre et Liberté* (July-September) is full of excellent material, and some acknowledgments are due as well as a tribute to our late colleague, Dr A. Nicolaevsky, whose death we were sorry to report last month. Pride of place is given to an article entitled *Marxism and Georgeism*, which is in fact the whole of Chapter iv (*Landlord and Capitalist*) of Mr Fredk. Verinder's book *Land and Freedom*.* It is translated by Dr Nicolaevsky, who also translated the

* Price 2s. 6d., published by the Hogarth Press, and obtainable from the Henry George Foundation, 34 Knightrider Street, E.C.4.