

AGRICULTURAL TRADE UNIONISM IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, 1872 - 85

PAMELA HORN

Farm labourers, unlike workers in many other industries, came relatively late to the idea of trade unionism. Admittedly the first unsuccessful attempts at combination were made from the 1830s – with the ‘Tolpuddle Martyrs’ of Dorset one obvious example that springs to mind – but their impact was both limited and short-lived.¹ Again in the later 1860s, at a time of rising prices and of agitation among urban workers for the passage of the 1867 Reform Bill extending the Parliamentary franchise, there was renewed interest in unionism in some country districts. The men of Buckinghamshire played their part in this, with the formation of a Buckingham Farm Labourers’ Union in the spring of 1867. It had as its prime objective the securing of higher wages and although it had a measure of success in that direction, both its leadership and its area of recruitment were too narrow for real success.² Five more years were to elapse before an effective agricultural union movement was at last established within the county.

The timing of this change of attitude is significant, for it came at the end of a period of prosperity for English agriculture – a prosperity in which the farm worker had shared to but a limited degree by way of higher wages – and at a time when food prices were high. The investigations of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture revealed that in 1868 average basic weekly wage rates for general labourers ranged from 11s. or 12s. in the Thame, Buckingham, Winslow and Leighton Buzzard areas of Buckinghamshire, to about 13s. in the Eton district and parts of the Vale of Aylesbury. Wages of carters, cowmen and shepherds were 1s. or 2s. per week above these levels but, of course, they had to work on Sundays.³ Even if extra piecework earnings were secured at haymaking and harvest, many rural families found it difficult to make ends meet.

Another factor contributing to the growing unrest of the early 1870s was the general economic boom of those years and the opportunities for alternative employment in the towns which were available to those who cared to look for them. At the same time the passage of the 1871 Trade Union Act drew attention to the legal and financial benefits unions could now enjoy, while the success of a contemporary movement for a nine-hour working day among engineers and builders further underlined the possible benefits of trade unionism. It is notable that when the farm labourers did combine, one of their

1. Reg Groves *Sharpen the Sickle!* (London, 1949), Chapter 1. For a full account of the Tolpuddle affair see Joyce Marlow, *The Tolpuddle Martyrs* (London, 1971).

2. Pamela L. R. Horn, ‘The Gawcott Revolt of 1867’ in *Records of Bucks*, Vol. XIX, Part 3, 1973, p.301.

3. First Report of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture, Parliamentary Papers, 1867–68, Vol. XVII, Report by Mr. G. Culley on Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, p.125.

early demands was for a nine-hour day, although this was later dropped when the main attention of the men turned to securing higher wages. Nevertheless, pressure for a shorter working day and for the payment of overtime remained part of their programme.

Within months of the first upsurge of interest in rural unionism in 1871-72, several separate organizations sprang up, covering most of the counties of southern and central England, and determined efforts were soon being made to co-ordinate their activities. The most influential of the groupings was the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (N.A.L.U.), which was formed by the labourers of South Warwickshire in May, 1872, under the leadership of Joseph Arch, a former hedgecutter and a man of great determination and energy. The new union had been established following a successful strike for higher wages in the Wellesbourne area of Warwickshire – a dispute which had focused public opinion on the whole question of rural unionism.⁴ Newspapers like the Daily News and the Daily Telegraph gave extensive coverage both to the strike itself and to the living conditions of the men involved, while general sympathy and financial support were forthcoming from many parts of England.

Buckinghamshire shared in the general militancy which flowed from this. Within the county the prime mover appears to have been a young Norfolk-born schoolmaster, named Edward Richardson, who had been working in the village of Dinton.⁵ In a pamphlet written in May, 1872, in support of the labourers' movement, Richardson expressed bitter discontent at his own lot in life. According to him, the country schoolmaster was the 'parson's fag, squire's door-mat, church scraper, professional singer, sub-curate, land surveyor, drill master, club collector, parish clerk, letter writer, librarian, washerwoman's target, organist, choir master, and youth's instructor.'⁶ It was perhaps in a desire to escape from this that Richardson formed the Bucks Farm Labourers' Union in April, 1872, and later became a full-time National Union delegate and an emigration agent for the Australian State of Queensland. Nevertheless he also displayed sincere concern at the labourers' situation. At a meeting in the Market Square, Aylesbury, in the middle of May, 1872, for example, he pointed out that in 1817 the county's labourers had earned 1s. a day; in 1872 they were still receiving only 11s. or 12s. a week in many cases, so that in the course of sixty years 'of the greatest improvements the world had ever seen the wages of the labourer had been advanced only a penny a year, while tradesmen, manufacturers and merchants had had their earnings doubled and trebled.' The farm worker was but a 'poor, neglected, despised serf of the soil', who would be 'thought the more of by demanding higher pay'.⁷ His words were soon to bear fruit, for within months Aylesbury became the centre of one district of the National Union, incorporating villages in the south and centre of the county which had originally been covered by Richardson's Bucks Farm Labourers' Union. George Dormer of Whitchurch became its general secretary. Parishes in the north of the county were covered by a second district centred around Wolverton and deriving support not only from farm workers but

4. For an account of the establishment of the Warwickshire union movement see Pamela Horn, *Joseph Arch* (Kineton, 1971), pp.44-67.

5. Richardson was born on 10th June, 1848, one of a large family. His father was Richard Richardson, a Fakenham shoemaker. Early in life, while still under twenty, he moved to London as a schoolmaster and then travelled on to Buckinghamshire. Indeed, according to the hostile *Bucks Herald* of 18th May, 1872, he had had six different jobs as a teacher even though he was still only in his middle twenties.

6. Edward Richardson, *Cloddy in Bucks* (London, 1872, pamphlet), p.iv.

7. *Bucks Advertiser*, 18th May, 1872.

also from railwaymen and mechanics. It was affiliated to the N.A.L.U. in the spring of 1873, with Leonard Clarke, a National delegate from Glemsford in Suffolk as its general secretary.⁸ (See Appendix 1 for district membership figures.)

Among the first objectives of the unionists, both at national and local level, was the obtaining of higher wages and initially their efforts met with considerable success. Over the two years 1872-74 it has been estimated that national average wage rates in agriculture advanced by about 20 to 25 per cent. Buckinghamshire shared in the general rise. In the Wolverton district, for example, it was claimed that basic wages had advanced from 12s. per week before the agitation commenced to as much as 16s. in certain cases. Sometimes the increase was conceded by the farmers without the necessity for strike action, but in other cases strikes and lock-outs occurred. In a report published in the National Union newspaper, the Labourers' Union Chronicle, Richardson claimed that by September, 1872, 'several strikes' on individual farms had occurred but had been quickly terminated 'with the happiest results'. 'No one case of violence, police interference or intimidation has occurred at any meeting', he declared, while wages had been raised by 2s. and 3s. per week.⁹

But not all demands were settled as peacefully as this, and an example of the other kind took place at Swanbourne, on the Fremantle estate, in the spring of 1873. In January of that year the labourers had expressed discontent over the distribution and letting of charity land in the village. The community had a history of charity land disputes and in 1866 there had even been an attack on the vicarage over the incumbent's interference in the letting of nine acres of such land in the parish.¹⁰ In 1873 this dissatisfaction was quickly coupled with a demand for a 3s. per week rise in pay and for a 'general conformity' to union rules by the employers. (See Appendix 2.) Sir Thomas Fremantle, to whom the wage application was addressed, immediately contacted his bailiff to inform him that while he would increase wages, if this were necessary, he would not have anything to do with the union. Shortly after an offer of a 1s. per week advance in wages was made, provided the men left the union. This they refused to do and on 3rd March they came out on strike. Edward Fremantle, Sir Thomas's son, writing from the scene of the dispute, expressed anxiety at the situation: 'We shall I fear have some trouble as idleness is likely to lead to riot. There has been a grand parade of Union people through the village this morning, about 38 in all, men women and children wearing rosettes'.

The strikers, for their part, received the union's customary strike benefit of 9s. per week, but in spite of this and of collections organised on their behalf in nearby villages, they soon began to feel the pinch.¹¹ Few men had reserves of their own to rely upon. There were suggestions that some might emigrate to Queensland, and a pamphlet offering free passages to farm labourers and female domestic servants who would travel to that State, is preserved in the Fremantle papers.¹² Migration to the North of England was also suggested and on 11th March about a dozen of the strikers decided to leave

8. Clarke was branch secretary for the N.A.L.U. in his native Glemsford until early in 1873 when he left 'to go out as a delegate'. I am indebted to Mr. Nigel Scotland of Aberdeen University for this information.

9. Labourers' Union Chronicle, 5th September, 1872.

10. Bucks Herald, 10th March and 25th April, 1866.

11. Labourers' Union Chronicle, 15th March, 1873, records that 6s. 6½d. was collected at Mursley for the 'Swanbourne Lockout'. On 29th March the newspaper acknowledged a further 30s. 4d. for the same purpose.

12. Fremantle Papers, D/FR/109 at Buckinghamshire Record Office.

for jobs in Yorkshire, where they were expected to earn about £1 a week. By that date the financial plight of many of the families had become desperate. Edmund Fremantle's wife, in a letter to her father-in-law, claimed that 'some of the women [were] selling their household goods to raise money to pay their way . . . I saw a cartload of things go away yesterday that some man had bought. One of the Unionists told me that they never imagined it would [come] to a strike. They quite thought that you with your usual kindness would have given in directly and that the farmers would have been obliged to follow your example'.

In these circumstances, the next developments were scarcely surprising. The men held out for one week more, and then on 19th March they decided to accept Sir Thomas's terms of 1s. per week rise in return for their leaving the union. Fremantle accepted their surrender with restrained satisfaction. In a letter to his bailiff, he wrote: 'I am glad that your men are prepared to discontinue their connection with the Union. They have put you to much loss and inconvenience, but as I believe they acted through ignorance and were misled by mischievous and designing men, I will not object to your taking them back . . . provided they undertake not to rejoin or subscribe to the Union so long as they are working for you'.¹³

The Fremantle papers contain a number of copies of the union newspaper for the next few months of 1873, so it is clear that Sir Thomas continued to keep his eye on the men to make sure that they kept their word. Certainly an attempt to revive the union branch in the autumn of 1874 proved a complete failure.

The Swanbourne dispute in its small way underlines the difficulty of organising men who had few resources to fall back upon and who were ill-equipped both educationally and psychologically to make a prolonged stand against determined employers. In other villages, too, including Sherrington, Chinnor and Wingrave, men lost their jobs for refusing to give up union membership.¹⁴ Evictions from tied cottages also took place. Yet, despite the difficulties, union membership continued to grow and by June, 1874, had reached 2,577 in the Aylesbury district and 2,050 in the Wolverton.¹⁵

But as Buckinghamshire unionists came to understand the difficulties involved in organising successful strikes to secure higher wages, so they decided to turn their attention to another possible solution – namely that of reducing the supply of village labour by campaigns to promote migration and emigration. In this may it was hoped that workers who remained behind might gain a scarcity value.

Migration to Yorkshire, Lancashire, Durham and other Northern counties was one way out and at a meeting in April, 1874, the Aylesbury district committee claimed that they had financed the movement of 205 members to the 'North' during the preceding six months – at a cost of £110 to union funds. Unfortunately not all of those who migrated were happy in their new homes. Some missed their friends and relatives and returned to their villages within a few weeks. By so doing they undermined the confidence of their fellows both in the effectiveness of migration and in the union movement as a whole. These backsliders became the object of increasingly bitter attacks from the union leaders. In August, 1874, for example, George Dormer, the Aylesbury district

13. A fuller account of the Swanbourne dispute can be found in Pamela Horn, 'Landowners and the Agricultural Trade Union Movement of the 1870s' in the *Local Historian*, Vol. 11, No.3, August 1974, pp.135-140.

14. *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, 4th July and 25th July, 1874.

15. *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, 13th June, 1874.

secretary, condemned the 'discreditable' way some of the men had behaved: 'They have other men's money to go with, and then, for the most part, leave the union. After a time – generally about the beginning of hay time – for some frivolous reason they return, and ever after are more false and cringing to farmers than before, thus doing all good honest unionists harm. In the village from which I write [unnamed but probably Whitchurch] nearly 20 such braggarts have returned, and in no single instance have they repaid their migration money, or kept their payments up.'¹⁶

Emigration, by contrast, was a more permanent solution, and for this reason was preferred by the union leaders. As early as the spring of 1873 the Aylesbury district had become closely involved in emigration to Queensland. In March of that year Edward Richardson personally escorted about 250 emigrants to the colony, and on his return wrote enthusiastically to the press of his experiences, as well as holding numerous meetings on the subject in the Buckinghamshire villages. His activities were also noted by the Australian press, the *Brisbane Courier* of 21st January, 1874, welcoming his appointment as 'an accredited agent of the great English emigration movement' and seeing him as a man who 'ought to be able to exercise an immense influence amongst the people who know and who trust him.'¹⁷ The union newspaper, the *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, likewise played its part, publishing letters from satisfied emigrants – like Henry Slade, aged 19, formerly of Quanton, who had settled in Maryborough in Queensland. He was working for a builder at a wage of 8s. a day plus his keep: 'I never was more happy in my life than I am now', he wrote. 'It is a fine country for anyone to be'.¹⁸ Similarly, Solomon Sawyer of Long Crendon, who had obtained work along with his son and daughter at Ipswich, Queensland, wrote cheerfully of the high wages and of how his son now had money in the bank. He concluded his letter: 'I wish I had been here twenty years ago'.¹⁹ These accounts were designed to persuade waverers to take the plunge, and clearly they had some success. In the six months ending April, 1874, over two hundred members were said to have been assisted to emigrate from the Aylesbury district alone, at a cost of £120 to union funds.²⁰ In the Wolverton district, too, Leonard Clarke, the secretary, spoke of the 'beneficial effects' of removing at least two or three families from the district every week.

New Zealand and Canada also shared, but to a lesser degree, in the emigration from Buckinghamshire, and there is no doubt that overall the total numbers of men from the county involved in the movement to one or other of the colonies must have run into several hundreds during the period 1872-75. In the two years up to the beginning of January, 1874, it was claimed that eight hundred to one thousand had left the Aylesbury district alone. Unfortunately, from the long term point of view, both migration and emigration robbed the union of many of its most effective local leaders, since it was usually the men with initiative and enterprise who moved away.

Those union leaders who, like Richardson, were accredited emigration agents were, of course, gaining financially from the enterprise, and this may have helped to increase their enthusiasm. At the time of his first trip to Queensland, Richardson was paid £30

16. *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, 15th August, 1874.

17. For an account of the N.A.L.U. attitude towards emigration see Pamela Horn, 'Agricultural Trade Unionism and Emigration, 1872-1881' in *Historical Journal*, Vol. XV, 1, 1972, pp.87-102.

18. *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, 5th September, 1874.

19. *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, 10th January, 1874.

20. *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, 18th April, 1874.

commission, but remuneration at a higher rate was soon to be available – not always by honest means. Thus, when he escorted a second party to Queensland in the autumn of 1874 his commission amounted to £105 14s. But in addition, according to the Colonial Secretary of Queensland, the State government was forced to write off a further balance of £755 18s. 5d. which Richardson had collected on the Government's behalf but never paid over. And on 2nd February, 1875, the Colonial Secretary laid down that he was on no account to be employed again by the Queensland Government: 'Mr. Richardson is not a person in whom any reliance can be placed and . . . he is utterly undeserving of the confidence of the Government. Sixty Pounds in lieu of a Return passage have been given to Mr. Richardson but there is reason to believe that he has no present intention of returning to England'. Nor did he, and he took his revenge by writing to the English press in terms as critical of Queensland as his earlier reports had been glowing.²¹

Meanwhile, as news of these developments began to reach England, there was increasing disillusionment with the union movement as a whole. This disquiet was increased by events within the National Union leadership itself. In the spring and summer of 1874 there had been a large-scale lock-out of perhaps 6,000 unionists employed in East Anglia, as farmers tried to break the union in one of its strongholds. The dispute lasted for nearly six months, and while it was in progress efforts were made in other parts of the country – including Buckinghamshire – to collect funds to support the men affected. In April, 1874, the Aylesbury district sent about £50 to the lock-out fund, plus two payments of over £30 in May and June. Yet, despite the promises made by the National leaders that they would stand by the men to the end – and despite the generosity of other trade unions and the general public in providing money – in the end the union had to accept defeat. The drain on resources was just too great for them to continue, with nearly £15,000 granted to one district alone.²² A number of the men were only re-employed on the understanding that they left the union. In Buckinghamshire the feeling began to take root that the movement had been 'smashed' and the strikers betrayed.

Soon disquiet increased as there were rumours that the contributions being sent to the Leamington headquarters of the N.A.L.U. were being misapplied and were being wasted on high salaries to officials at the central office. As early as June, 1875, at the annual conference of the N.A.L.U. held at Birmingham, the Aylesbury district delegate called for the publication of quarterly balance sheets so that they could refute 'insinuations of enemies of the Union that its leaders were dishonest men'. Although his proposal was accepted, this did not prevent a dwindling of confidence in the county. Typical accounts of meetings published in the Labourers' Union Chronicle speak, as at Cuddington, of the men having 'lost heart', while at Ludgershall, the local delegate claimed that he had been forced to walk four miles to get a bed for the night 'because no one dared to lodge him for fear of being turned out of their mud hovels'.²³ And at Stoke Mandeville there was even an unsuccessful attempt in July, 1875, to form an

21. Richardson's career eventually came to an end shortly before his thirtieth birthday, when he was involved in a fatal boating accident just off the Tasmanian coast on 4th May, 1878. Immediately prior to his death he had been working as an actor and freelance journalist in Hobart, Tasmania. *English Labourers' Chronicle*, 31st August, 1878.

22. Frederick Clifford, *The Agricultural Lock-out of 1874* (London, 1875), p.21.

23. *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, 26th September, 1874.

an independent union, the Bucks Federal Union. The reasons given for this last development are significant. According to its leader, Thomas Dixon, the labourers were anxious to keep their 2¼d. per week contribution to union funds in the hands of their own branch so that they could use it to rent plots of land or set up a co-operative shop. 'We must have land, co-operative stores, friendly societies, &c., for our hard-earned pence, not the frothy prattle of incompetent hirelings, whose pride is to be greeted and cheered on village greens . . . that neither fills our bellies nor clothes our backs, nor puts money in our pockets. But we can now snap our fingers . . . having our twopences in our own hands, and able to know what becomes of our hard-earned pence'.²⁴ Suspicion that money was being wrongly spent by the union's central officers was a perennial weakness of the N.A.L.U. — as will be seen — even though evidence for it is slim.

But rank and file suspicions persisted, with damaging effect upon the level of membership in Buckinghamshire. By June, 1875, the Aylesbury district total had fallen to 1,650 and that of the Wolverton area to 1,900. In November of that year the Aylesbury district was wound up as a separate unit, ostensibly to save administrative expenses, but also, no doubt, because of the falling away of support within it. Branches formerly attached to it now moved over to the Wolverton district, although a few joined the nearby Oxford area. By late 1876 there were about 52 branches in the enlarged Wolverton district, as opposed to over eighty in the two districts combined about two years earlier.

Nor did the process of decline cease there, and once again financial problems were at the root of the trouble. In the spring of 1879 Leonard Clarke, now the main Buckinghamshire union leader, joined with Thomas Bayliss, the secretary of the Oxford district, to demand that the greater part of the union funds should be kept in the districts themselves instead of being sent to the N.A.L.U. headquarters in Leamington for the benefit of the movement as a whole. The minute book of the Oxford district reveals that in mid-January, 1879, the local leaders were complaining that the central system of government had failed 'to exercise a wise and judicious Management of the funds under its control and is convinced that Federation is the only effectual means to remedy the evil'. For them 'Federation' meant greater district autonomy.²⁵ When the issue was raised by Clarke and Bayliss at a special union conference held in London later in the month it caused a split within the movement. At one stage Clarke even suggested that Bayliss should take the chair at the meeting instead of the N.A.L.U. President, Joseph Arch. Although this and Clarke's other proposals regarding union re-organization were eventually rejected by the meeting, he and the Oxfordshire dissidents decided to break away to form a small independent union of their own, known as the National Land and Labour Union. Its inaugural meeting was held at Winslow in May, 1879, but it proved too weak to survive more than a few months. Shortly after its collapse Clarke obtained a position with the Prudential Assurance Company and took no further part in the union movement, while Bayliss, his fellow rebel, combined a business as a newsagent in Oxford with an agency for emigration and later with a coal merchant's business.²⁶

Meanwhile those few branches in North Bucks which remained loyal to the N.A.L.U. now joined with Northamptonshire to form a new district, while in the Aylesbury area

24. *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, 24th July, 1875.

25. *Agricultural Trade Unionism in Oxfordshire 1872-81* ed. Pamela Horn, Oxfordshire Record Society, XLVIII, 1974, p.104.

26. *Ibid.*, p.108. Howard Evans, *Radical Fights of Forty Years* (London n.d. c.1912), p.41. Bayliss died at Oxford in 1939 aged 91 — the last survivor of the original union leaders.

the survivors linked themselves to branches loyal to the parent union in Oxfordshire. By 1879 the total national membership of the N.A.L.U. had fallen to 20,000, as compared with the peak of over 86,000 claimed in the spring of 1874. Ten years later it had shrunk still further to 4,254 – or less than had been recorded in the two Buckinghamshire districts alone in 1874. Yet even at its height the N.A.L.U. had recruited less than one in ten of the nation's labourers; in Buckinghamshire the level had been around one in four. The large proportion of non-union labour was always a problem for the movement's organizers, although, in general, recruitment was most successful in the larger parishes and on labour-intensive arable farms.

Lack of confidence in the national leadership, concern at union financial arrangements and the general problems of recruitment in an industry where workers were poorly placed to engage in prolonged disputes with their employers, all help to explain the decline of the later 1870s. Emigration and migration had also removed some of the most able men from the villages. And on a broader front there were the difficulties faced by arable agriculture itself in the later nineteenth century as large quantities of cheap grain from the U.S.A. and Russia drove down prices, to the detriment of the British farmer. Agriculturists responded by cutting down on labour and, where possible, forcing down wage rates as well. The union showed itself powerless in the long run to fight this trend – as Joseph Arch, the N.A.L.U. president, reluctantly admitted when he appeared as a witness before the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression in August, 1881.²⁷

Yet there can be no doubt that in some Buckinghamshire communities the union did change village life, at least in the short term. In 1875, the incumbents of Aston Abbots, Bledlow, Little Horwood, Quanton and Thornborough all complained to the Bishop of Oxford in his triennial visitation returns that the population had decreased as a result of migration and emigration. Each of the villages had possessed a strong union branch in the early 1870s.

Again, there were claims that the union leaders, who were mostly Nonconformists, had undermined support for the Church of England in certain parishes. At Chearsley, for example, the incumbent declared in 1875: 'Lately the agents of the N.A.L.U. have been in the parish, and held meetings, often on Sundays, and they have disquieted the people, & said much against the Landowners and the Clergy. Since Mr. Richardson's departure the agitation has decreased; but for a time there can be no doubt that the congregation diminished, & the people became irregular in their attendance, and careless about their public religious duties. I trust when the summer months arrive that I shall see as good congregations as we used to have, though I am not sure that the ill-feeling has died away entirely'. At Hoggston, near Winslow, the clergyman similarly complained: 'There is a large number of unbaptized children – between 20 and 30 whose parents will not allow them to be baptized . . . This feeling of alienation from the Church is, I believe, greatly fostered & encouraged by the influence of the 'Labourers' Union' which frequently holds "strike" meetings in the parish & circulates their paper in nearly all the cottages.' In all, thirteen incumbents out of 214 making returns from Buckinghamshire claimed that their congregations had been adversely affected by union agitation.²⁸

27. Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression, Parliamentary Papers, 1882, Vo. XIV, Q.58,562.

28. Clergy Visitation Returns for the Oxford Diocese at the Bodleian Library Oxford, MS.Oxf.Dioc.Pp.c.340 for 1875.

This problem of alienation was aggravated in the spring of 1876 and 1877 when there was a determined effort by unionists in a number of villages to get their candidate chosen as a churchwarden – partly so that he could keep his eye on the distribution of village charities. The so-called ‘battle of the vestries’ reached a particularly bitter stage at Wavendon in 1876. Here the distribution of the village charities, especially coal, was also under dispute and it was only after several months of bickering that the labourers’ candidate was eventually confirmed as churchwarden, in November, 1876.²⁹

Even in 1878, when the union had weakened further, there were a few complaints by clergymen, as at Little Marlow, where there were said to be ‘Fewer labourers [at church] since the agricultural agitation’. But a more typical comment at this date came from Marsh Gibbon: ‘The hostility to the Church, due to the action of the Labourers’ Union has sensibly diminished in this Parish’. Similarly at Walton St. Michael: ‘Attendance has rather increased in the last two years, but the labourers are more remiss than they used to be before the wages agitation, tho’ not here ill-disposed’. Seven incumbents made reference to the union agitation in that year out of the 214 submitting returns.³⁰

Finally, in the early 1880s Buckinghamshire farm workers, through their union, turned to political matters as they pressed for an extension of the franchise to the rural householder, to match the rights given to the townsman in 1867. All of the National Union leaders were strong supporters of the Liberal Party, and this was the political line adopted by most active unionists in Buckinghamshire, too. Certainly when George Howell, a bricklayer and trade unionist from London, fought Aylesbury as a Radical in 1868 and 1874, he received much support, particularly on the latter occasion, from the villages within the constituency, even from those who were not registered voters. Howell was able to muster a bodyguard of labourers carrying sticks to protect him against physical assault from supporters of his Conservative opponent, as happened at a rowdy meeting in Aylesbury Corn Exchange early in February, 1874.³¹ The labourers of Haddenham, which was at that time a stronghold both of radicalism and of the union, were particularly active supporters of Howell. And in his election address Howell stressed the need for land reform and for an extension of the county franchise – both topics likely to prove popular among the agricultural workers. Indeed, the N.A.L.U. itself repeatedly pressed for legislation which would lead to a break up of the large landed estates by reforming the law of primogeniture and entail.

During the 1880s, attempts to secure changes in the franchise were redoubled by rural unionists everywhere, and there was general rejoicing when the vote was at last extended in December, 1884. It now became the role of the local union leaders to try to steer those votes towards the Liberal Party. Thus the secretary of the joint Northampton and Bucks. district pressed labourers in Buckinghamshire to ‘strengthen the Liberal cause by joining its ranks as local associations are formed, and in every possible way, with a view to the returning of Liberal candidates of an advanced type at the next

29. Howard Evans, *op.cit.*, pp.50-51.

30. Clergy Visitation Returns for the Oxford Diocese at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS.Oxf.Dioc.Pp.c.343, for 1878.

31. Bucks. Herald, 7th February, 1874. Reg Groves, *op.cit.*, p.34. F.M. Leventhal, *Respectable Radical: George Howell and Victorian Working Class Politics* (London, 1971), pp.142-143. The last survivor of these election contests, Arthur H. Hutt, died in Tindal House Infirmary in August, 1946, aged 89 years. He was one of the Haddenham men who marched to Aylesbury as a bodyguard for George Howell; at the 1874 election he would have been aged about seventeen.

general election'. Efforts were made to try to revive moribund union branches, and in the autumn of 1885, shortly before the general election was held, political meetings were organized and mock polls held. In every case there was an attempt made to link the local Liberal candidate with William Gladstone, the revered national leader, and the mock polls were normally held between him and Sir Stafford Northcote, the Conservative leader in the Commons. One such was held at Quainton in August, 1885, and gave Mr. Gladstone 24 votes and Sir Stafford nil; at another organized at Dunton the figures were 25 to 1, respectively.³² Arch himself came to address a rally at Aston Abbots on 10th September, but bad weather was blamed on this occasion for the modest turnout.

Although in the 1885 General Election, Liberal candidates were successful in the Mid- and North Bucks. constituencies, and this was made a subject for self-congratulation by the N.A.L.U. leaders, it is doubtful whether the union's impact was strong enough to exert real influence. Certainly Pelling, in his examination of the two constituencies, concludes that the family influence of the successful candidates (Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild and Captain Verney, respectively) plus, in North Bucks, the presence of a substantial industrial population around Wolverton and Bletchley, were the decisive factors in the Liberals' favour.³³ And in confirmation of that it may be noted that when Rothschild moved over to become a Liberal Unionist in the general election 1886 and beyond, the support he obtained from the villages of the Vale and Aylesbury was unchanged. The N.A.L.U., by contrast, was still adhering to a strongly Gladstonian line.

For the vast majority of Buckinghamshire labourers, however, the N.A.L.U. had by the mid-1880s become an irrelevancy. Indeed, the Northants, and Bucks. district secretary referred to the 'dull, stupid and jealous character' of the labourers in the county. Even Haddenham, a former stronghold, could by 1888 muster only about three members, while Bishopstone and Quainton had around ten apiece.³⁴

The daily life of most workers was regulated not by the rules of the N.A.L.U. but by the nature of their employment and the changes of the seasons. The men's preoccupations were not with union affairs but with the ebb and flow of work on the farm, with their allotment gardens and with the pig that many of them would keep. Those who were not satisfied with agricultural labouring, with its still low wages and long working hours, left the villages – and it must be remembered that the migration of countrymen to the towns continued unabated to the end of the century. In 1861 there had been 18,703 farm labourers, farm servants and shepherds in Buckinghamshire; by 1871 the figure was 17,016; by 1881, 13,671 and by 1901 only 10,899. In other words there had been a drop of over two-fifths in the number of land workers in just forty years. The discontented and the dissatisfied were voting in the most effective way possible, with their feet. And the close proximity of London, with its insatiable demand for labour, made migration from Buckinghamshire a comparatively simple affair. By contrast, rural unionism was to have little significance in the county until the First World War, and then the initiative was to be in the hands of a new union based on Norfolk and founded in 1906. The old N.A.L.U. had finally expired, even in its East Anglian strongholds, by the mid-1890s.³⁵

32. *English Labourers' Chronicle*, 15th August, 1885.

33. Henry Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910* (London, 1967), pp.118-119.

34. *English Labourers' Chronicle*, 28th April and 5th May, 1888.

35. J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 1974), pp.83-84. Pamela Horn, *Joseph Arch*, p.206.

Appendix 1
MEMBERSHIP OF THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS' UNION IN
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Initially two union districts recruited within the county, viz. the Aylesbury District and the Wolverton District. In November, 1875, the Aylesbury District was dissolved and most of the county's branches were incorporated into the Wolverton District, although a few joined with Oxfordshire. In November, 1876, the Wolverton District changed its name to Bucks.; it finally disappeared in the spring of 1879 and the surviving Buckinghamshire branches then became incorporated with Northamptonshire or Oxfordshire – but mainly with the former county.

	Aylesbury Membership	Wolverton Membership	
June, 1874	2,577	2,050	
May, 1875	1,650	1,900	
October, 1875	1,204	1,700	
May, 1876 (Wolverton only)	—	1,800	
April, 1877 (Bucks. district)	—	1,700	to) almost certainly an exagger-) ation of the true level.
		1,800	

Appendix 2
DISPUTE AT SWANBOURNE IN FEBRUARY/MARCH, 1873

Letter of application put forward by labourers employed by Sir Thomas Fremantle.

By Wish	Charles Alderman	Jeremiah Alderman (signed with X)
	George Alderman	William Gurnett
	Phillip Alderman	George Walker (signed with X)
	Jeremiah Harding	Thos. Cambell (signed with X)
	William Cambell (signed with X)	John Grantham (signed with X)

To the Right Honr.

Sir Thos. M. Fremantle

We the above signed Laborers in your employ beg respectfully to Inform you that on and after Feb. 22nd, 1873 they will require a rise in their wages of 3/- per week and a general conformity to their rules a copy of which I enclose. Being desirous of retaining good relations between employers and employed, and to assure you that no unbecoming feelings prompts us to such a course we invite you (if our terms are not in accordance with your views) to appoint an early time to meet us, so that we may fairly consider the matter and arrange our affairs amicably.

Your Obedient Servants
The Committee

JOS. ALDERMAN Secretary

Alfred Pitkin
Jasper Alderman
Reuben Ash
William Gurnett
Thomas Phillips
Phillip Alderman
Jeremiah Harding

Joseph Tattam on Executive Committee Aylesbury

(Joseph Alderman, the secretary, was a young tailor in the village; Tattam was a smallholder whose family had once lived in Swanbourne.)