



Labourer's Friend Society Meeting

A public meeting was held in the Town-hall, Devizes, on Saturday last, for the purpose of hearing **Mr. G.W. Perry**, agent to the Labourers Friend Society, explain the objects of that Institution; and also of considering the propriety of forming a Committee in this town, for the purpose of giving the system it recommends, a fair trial in the surrounding neighbourhood. The meeting was very respectably attended; but, as at most meetings, where the feelings of benevolence are likely to be called into action, the greater part of the company was composed of ladies. Next to the ladies, we have frequently observed, the members of that calumniated body, the Clergy, take the most prominent part in all works of benevolence; and among those present, on the above occasion, we observed the **Rev. Mr. Methuen**, the **Rev. Mr. Vincent**, the **Rev. Mr. Smith**, the **Rev. Mr. Bassett**, the **Rev. Mr. Lucas**, the **Rev. Mr. Elliott**, the **Rev. Mr. Mayo**, the **Rev. Mr. Fosbury**, and the **Rev. Mr. Medicott**. Among the rest of the company, there were several substantial farmers, who appeared to take a deep interest in the meeting. The **Rev. Mr. Smith** was unanimously called to the chair. After briefly stating the objects of the meeting, the Rev. gent requested **Mr. Perry** to explain the principles of the Institution he represented.

Mr. Perry then came forward, and, in a speech which occupied an hour and a half, in the delivery of which he was frequently and warmly applauded, (of which, however, we are reluctantly obliged to give a mere outline), commenced by stating that it was the aim and object of the Labourers Friend Society to ameliorate the moral and physical condition of the labouring classes, by calling the attention of the upper classes for the best method for putting them in possession of the means of earning their own subsistence; and, independently of parochial aid, of enabling them to "provide things honest in the sight of all men." To the labour of these classes (he said) we are mainly indebted to our national wealth and greatness :- it must, therefore, be a matter of paramount importance that the labourer should fill his just place in society, and receive such a remuneration for his industry, as shall ensure him the comforts of life. The labourer's friend, is the friend of his country, - and in no way can he be more rationally and efficiently promote the moral and physical interests of the poor but health and able bodied labourer, than be superseding the necessity of his receiving that as a boon from the parish funds, or the cold hand of charity, which he can, when possessed of the means, earn by his own industry. He that instead of fine-spun and specious, but vague and unsubstantial theory, looks at men and things - who studies well the domestic history of his country - who takes facts for the basis of his plans, and who traces effects up to their causes, and causes down to their effects, while he is aware that there is no better criterion of the prosperous state of any country than its peasantry being comfortable, happy, contented, and independent of every resource but their labour for their support; knows also, that in the allotment system, which this Society aims at stimulating the nation to adopt, there is nothing new in the history of England. Down to the close of the

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American war, this system had generally prevailed over England; and it is to the great departure from this system, that many of the sore evils and heavy burdens which are now so severely felt and loudly complained of, are attributable. It is to a different and much worse system having been introduced, that we are to trace much of that alienation of mind - of that disruption of the social ties, which once connected master and servant - of that degradation of feeling and character, and that utter recklessness of all regard to the future, with which now, at an early age, and in the most wretched circumstances, they enter on the married state - which unhappily characterize our peasantry. The system advocated by this Society (said Mr. P) is totally dissimilar to that which has had such a bad effect on the Irish peasantry. In the Sister Kingdom the poor labourer, or rather cottager, too frequently depends solely on a small potato plot, for the maintenance of himself and family. For this small patch of land, he generally pays a most exorbitant rent. He has no field for exertion - no scope for rising by his industry. He may reckon on a possible, but precarious, and truly wretched existence :- independence is out of the question.

The Labourers Friend Society, on the contrary, simply advocates a return to the system, which was so well understood in the reign of Elizabeth, that a law was enacted, by which it was rendered penal for any person to erect a cottage for an agricultural labourer, without attaching a certain quantity of land to it. This Statute is still unrepealed. **Mr. Perry** begged the meeting to understand that the system he recommended, aimed not at raising the occupant above the rank of a labourer. A labourer he found him, and a labourer he would leave him; but while he had no wish that he should not continue still to work for the farmer as formerly, he would wish him to possess the means of profitably employing his spare time. He would, as a friend to his country, as well as to the labourer, earnestly press on his audience the high utility of having a "stake in the hedge," and a property in the soil - something to identify his interests with those of the great body politic. He would give him a motive to industry, and a reward for it. He would connect his moral conduct with his physical welfare. He would make it more profitable for him to be a good member of society than a bad one : he would attach him to his country and its laws; he would give him a stimulus to that independence of mind, which teaches a poor man to respect himself; he would withdraw him from the ale-house, and bad company; he would give him the means of training up his children in early habits of industry; and the only shackles he would impose on him would be, that in return, he should be industrious and moral. The Agent then adverted to the size of the allotments; and having stated that all Labourers might be divided into two classes - the permanent and the occasional, - he said that each should have, at a farmer's rent, as much land as he, his wife, and children could cultivate, during those hours which would otherwise be lost or mis-spent. In a happy strain of pointed irony, he showed the futility and absurdity of the ridiculous cavils and objections raised against the system - as, that it would tend to make many of the labourers small farmers - give them facilities for thieving - tend to lower the price of grain - promote an increase in our population - and injure the farmers interests, from the exhaustion of the physical strength of the labourer in cultivating his own land. He quoted and detailed a number of highly interesting facts in corroboration of his views, and in refutation of the charges brought against them, which want of room, compels us to omit. He called the serious attention of the meeting to the operation of the beer bill; and in very forcible language, drew and affecting picture of its effects on the minds and habits of our peasantry. He said, it was effecting a moral blight on those to whom it was meant as a boon; and hoped the good people of Devizes would not fail to memorialize the Government on this important subject. The speaker next called the attention of his hearers to the condition of the Labourers Cottages, and stated that it was a prominent part of his duty, to advert to this subject.

Every house inhabited by a family, ought to contain a suitable number of sleeping apartments, so that in all cases there might be a sufficient barrier for that propriety and decency of feeling between the sexes, which is essential to morality. He next, at considerable length, and in a strain of pathetic eloquence, drew the attention of the auditory to the vast importance of a sound biblical education being brought within the reach of all ranks. A general, or rather an universal diffusion of moral science, (said **Mr. Perry**) lies at the

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root of every improvement calculated to raise, to refine, to bless us as Christian community. The kind of education, which he advocated, was not of a speculative and political kind : he pleaded for the extension of an education which, transcending the limits of time, fits man for the skies; which teaches him his Being's end and aim; teaches him how to live, and how to die; which forms in him a right motive to action, and deters him from the perpetration of crime, not merely because there are such things as gallows, a gaol, a house of correction, a place of transportation, &c., but because there is an Omniscient God who takes cognizance of all our actions, whose awards reach far beyond the present life; at whose bar we shall stand when the tide of time shall have disembogued itself into the boundless abyss of endless duration; and because it shall be well or ill with us in eternity, as we have acted well or ill here. And, said the speaker, as it almost amounts to an axiom, that in the same ratio at the poor man's physical circumstances are improved , so is his moral condition ameliorated; and as I have shown today, that in almost every instance in which our system has been judiciously adopted, a laudable desire has been manifested by the labourer to have his children taught "the good ways of the Lord;" who, and where is he who will not, as a patriot and philanthropist, assist, as far as he can, in promoting a measure fraught with so many advantages ?

Mr. Perry adverted to many other benefits resulting from the general adoption of the Allotment System - as the reduction of poor-rates, the provident habits of the cottager, &c.; and concluded by an energetic appeal to the Ladies present, who, he said, though generally termed the weaker sex, might, as far as regarded a development of the best feelings and principles of our nature, be termed the stronger sex.

Major Olivier concurred in most of the remarks which had fallen from **Mr. Perry**. He had himself witnessed, in Bedford, in Surrey, and in Northampton, the good effects to be derived from the allotment system; and he would cheerfully co-operate in furthering that system in the neighbourhood of Devides; as he was satisfied that it would only tend to promote the interests of the laborer, but also of the farmer, and of Society at large; and whilst it would add to the domestic comforts of the labourer, it would also render him a more faithful servant, and a more moral and better subject. Land, however, should be let to the deserving poor only, subject to certain conditions, and the occupation of it should be resumed by the farmer, upon a breach of those conditions. Acts of dishonesty or drunkenness ought certainly to subject the laborer to the deprivation of his allotment. The gallant Major concluded by combating some of the objections which had been made against the Society.

The **Rev. Mr. Methuen** said, from the depth of his heart he rejoiced at having an opportunity to further any system which had a tendency to benefit the poor laborer, or to render him more comfortable and happy. He could bear testimony to the ill-consequences arising from the non-adoption of the plan like the present ; he had known that laborers on the road, receiving the small pittance of 2s 6d a week, from the want of other occupation, wasted even the greater part of that pittance in the ale-house; whilst, on the other hand, he had seen the happiest results, where the system had been carried into execution. After paying a compliment to the father of **Mr. Estcourt**, who, he believed, was the first to introduce this system into this county, the Rev. Gent stated that he himself had been induced, during the last 12 months, to apportion a quantity of land at All Cannings to the poor, in allotments of about 40 lugs, which he was happy to say, had already been attended with great benefit. One person only had violated the terms upon which the land was let; and from that person his allotment had been withdrawn : he was an habitual frequenter of the public-house; and, as might be expected, gave up the land with great indifference, and for some time followed his favourite haunt - the ale-house. He had, however, constantly before his eyes the good effects of industry; he could not help perceiving how much more comfortable the families of others were than his was; and within 5 of six weeks, such was the impression it made upon him, that he, who had been one of the greatest drunkards in the parish, was induced to join the Temperance Society! At his solicitation, (said **Mr. Methuen**) I re-let him the land; and he is now quite an altered man. The Rev. ©Wiltshire OPC Project/2015/Maureen Withey

Gent said he would exert himself to further the objects of the Society.

Mr. G.E. Sloper observed, that during the 20 years he had lived at Etchilhampton, he had appropriated small quantities of land to the poor, which had been attended with success; but as he was now retired from business, he should like to hear the opinion of **Mr. Budd**, a practical farmer, on the subject.

Mr. Budd immediately presented himself to the notice of the Meeting. He said that he had been a farmer for 12 years, and experience had taught him that the landowners had it in their power to render the peasantry happy. It rested with them whether the laborers should be paid remunerating wages or not, and whether the system for allotting them small portions of land, should be carried into general operation. That the allotment system had been productive of much good, who that had witnessed its effects would deny? It had long been adopted in the parish in which he resided - in which parish also, every farmer agreed to take his proportion of the surplus labourers; and what was the result? Why, as might be expected, - diminished poor-rates, and an industrious, a moral, and a contented peasantry. He could wish that landlords, in letting farms, would stipulate, and have that stipulation entered in the lease, that farmers would be compelled to allot a small quantity of land to the poor - compelled to pay their labourers remunerating wages, and also to take their fair proportion of surplus laborers; of course taking good care that the rents shall be proportionately moderate, in order that the farmers may be enabled to comply with those conditions. There would then be an end, to the excuse, now too frequently used, that the landlord has been so extortionate in his rent, as to leave scarcely any thing for the labourer. No one litigiously disposed person would then, as now, have it in his power to upset the good arrangements of a whole parish. The land would be better cultivated, the labourer more contented, the farmer more satisfied, and the poor-rates greatly reduced. I will take upon me to say, (said **Mr. Budd**) that there is not one agricultural parish out of twenty, which contains a single labourer more than is absolutely necessary for the proper cultivation of the soil, and where the farmers would not find it to their benefit, equally to divide the laborers amongst them. I am (and I believe the generality of the farmers are also) for paying the labourer as much as he earns; whether married or single, he ought to receive remunerating wages for his labour. On my own farm, when a single man is able to do that species of work which is required from what I term a good labourer, I pay him the price of a good labourer; and it is by paying attention to this plan, that early and improvident marriages are prevented. During the riots which disgraced this county and the country in the latter part of the year 1830, my labourers rallied round me as one man; we conquered upwards of 300 of the rioters, as I have always found that 5 men embarked in a good cause, are equal to 50 in a bad one. I left my home without apprehension, and assisted in putting down riots in other parts of the county *. During my absence my thrashing machine was at work; on my return my property was as secure as when I left it; and I feel proud to say, that throughout the parish of Winterbourn, there is not a single laborer but would at this moment risk his life in defence of his master or his master's property. If Landlords and Stewards would in general meet the farmer with liberal feeling, I would answer for it, there would be no cause for legislating for the poor.

* The spirited exertions of **Mr. Budd**, during these riots, elicited the thanks of the Magistrates of the Marlborough and Swindon district; they were also represented to, and handsomely acknowledged by **Viscount Melbourne**.

Mr. G.E. Sloper said that during the riots, he certainly recommended the farmers to discontinue their thrashing machines; for he held that (unless under peculiar circumstances) where there was a superabundance of labourers, those machines ought not to be used; he agreed that the labourer ought to be paid remunerating wages, and he approved generally of **Mr. Budd's** plan; but could not help expressing his dislike of the compulsory clause. His motto was - no dictation either in religion or politics.

After some further discussion the meeting was adjourned until the 1st of March; in the meantime the Chairman kindly promised to write to various landowners in the neighbourhood on the subject.

We have heard that **Mr. Charles** and **Mr. Simon Hitchcock** of All Cannings, have determined to give the system an immediate trial.

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 21 February 1833