



"Them Against Us": One Vicar To Another, 1818

June 1st 1818, Mere Vicarage

My dear Sir,

I am sorry to hear so unpleasant an account of any farmer of Mere coming to your house and behaving in so scandalous a manner. There is no doubt that Nockey was the Person. I have made every enquiry about him, and have ascertained that he left Mere by the Coach on Friday Evening for Salisbury without any business to call him there. He has been recently confined in a Mad House at Hindon, and is getting thro his property (what little remains) very fast. He is about to leave his farm soon, and will be succeeded by a Relative of Mr. Philips whom I hope will not prove to be mad also. For an overbearing insolent Farmer is a great nuisance at any time, but a mad one is quite intolerable. My father however feels himself particularly indebted to you for this timely warning as we shall now take care to be prepared to give him a proper reception whenever he thinks fit to introduce himself.

Mr Seymour lately furnished me with a copy of your statement of facts, which for the useful information it contains, as well as the propriety of its diction reflects on you (in my Father's and my opinion) the greatest credit. And I trust that your excellent letter to the Chairman of the Committee of the Poor Laws will have the proper effect it merits. The farmers are now become the most oppressive and insolent class of the community. They consider it no deviation from rectitude and honor to practice any imposition whatever on the Clergy. But I think your work will prove highly conducive to the suppression of these nefarious practices, as it will open the eyes of those into whose hands it may fall and put them to work in opposing such an infamous invasion of their property and rights.

I some time ago remonstrated with a Farmer on the illegality of uniting labour with Poor Rates as it threw a disproportionate share of Rate on those whom the law never designed to bear it. He replied in a jeering manner 'that they would take care that the Clergyman always paid plenty of the Rates'. So much for these conscientious men."

This was a reference to the Poor Law Acts, by which each Parish was responsible for its poor people. There was great ill feeling about these laws — on both sides. Those giving it feeling that the ones taking it were idle layabouts, and those same 'layabouts' often being in a situation where there was absolutely no work available, and rather than seeing the family suffer, would apply to the Overseers of the Poor for relief. The money available came out of the rates, to which the labourers would not have contributed, and the general feeling was that if these labourers once had the relief, they would no longer seek work. (That argument has a topical ring to it). The Parish Constable was responsible for discharging the relief, and there are many reports still in existence where the record shows that a pregnant woman was given a small sum to move her on out of the area, because if her child was born

in that Parish, it would become their responsibility. Similar treatment was meted out to the sick and elderly.

The letter then continues,

"I feel my dear sir, as also my Father, particularly obliged to you for your very kind invitation to Wallop, but am sorry it will not at present be in my power to avail myself of it. As I am shortly going into Somersetshire, when I shall have the pleasure of seeing our mutual friend Mr. Wickham, and will recommend to his perusal your excellent and judicious work.

I purpose (if you should then be disengaged) coming to Wallop about Weyhill Fair, and embrace the opportunity of seeing it, being given to understand that it is well worth seeing."

He then ends his letter with a few words of comfort and support,

"I hope my dear sir that you do not suffer these unfeeling Farmers to give you any uneasiness of mind, as it will only afford them matter of triumph. And as for Nockey, it is highly probable he will again be confined which will stop his future annoyance.

With the united compliments of
my Father and Family
I remain My dear Sir,
Yours most sincerely,
B.N. Howell."

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