BLEDLOW AND THE LANCASHIRE COTTON INDUSTRY

PAMELA L. R. HORN

THE early part of the nineteenth century was a time of great difficulty and distress for many agricultural workers. Although wages had risen during the Napoleonic wars, they had failed to keep pace with the high cost of food, and, unfortunately, the ending of the Wars in 1815 brought no alleviation of the position. With grain prices slumping, farmers, too, were hit by depression, as English agriculture entered upon a period of radical change and readjustment. Wages were drastically lowered and in some instances the size of the labour force was reduced. Increasing numbers of labourers were forced to rely upon parish poor relief for subsistence and on the parish overseer for the provision of employment.[1] Their lot became miserable and degraded, and in 1830 their bitter frustration found a temporary outlet in a spate of rioting and machine breaking which affected several counties of southern and central England (including Buckinghamshire).[2] However, while this was an understandable reaction, it provided no real solution to the problem. More significant was the fact that it encouraged the Government to press forward, in 1834, with legislation to reform the Poor Law system and it led to greater attention being paid to the plight of the pauperized labourers.

In Bledlow, this general picture of distress was directly relevant. The village was overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture, so that at the time of the 1831 Census of Population, 152 families were "chiefly employed in agriculture", out of a total of 226 families living in the village. Of 256 males aged 20 or over living at Bledlow, 156 were described as agricultural labourers.[3] However, independent employment was difficult to obtain and reliance on parish relief became the order of the day. In the years 1831–34 inclusive, annual expenditure on poor relief in the village averaged the considerable sum of £1,857—and yet it proved inadequate to provide a reasonable living standard for its recipients.[4]

The paupers themselves bitterly resented their position. Eventually, thirty-two of them decided to take some action to draw the attention of the authorities to their plight, and on 4th December, 1834, they appealed in person for additional relief to the bench of magistrates at West Wycombe. On their appeal being rejected, in desperation they immediately resolved to write to the newly-established Poor Law Commissioners in London, giving details of their condition. (Since most of the men were completely illiterate the letter was, in fact, written by "a neighbour".) In this letter they described their situation as follows: "We are many of us married men, with large families; we are all able-bodied men, most willing to work, and very unwilling to live in idleness or on charity

. . . The married men among us are paid 7s. a-week; in harvest they may earn, for four or perhaps five weeks, as much as 15s. a-week; but this is the extent of our earnings during the year. The 7s. are spent as follows:

"We pay 4s. a-week for bread; this will buy a little more than eight quartern loaves. We pay 1s. 9d. more for bacon, and the remaining 15d. are laid out in soap, candles, sugar, tea, thread, and worsted, and such necessaries. . . . We have no money remaining to buy clothing or fuel, or to pay for our rent, which may be taken on the average at 60s. a-year. . . . If we manage to save a guinea out of our earnings in harvest, it is nearly all expended in paying for our shoes, which cost us 15s. or 16s. a-pair. We have no rich neighbours among us to help out our scanty means by their benevolence.

"Those among us who are single are paid only half-a-crown a week. . . .

"Gentlemen, the distress which we sometimes suffer cannot be conceived by you. Several of us, when we attended the magistrates this morning (?) at two o'clock, had been without food since yesterday evening. . . ." The letter concluded with a pathetic request for work or, at the very least, for the provision of land on which they could "plant a few potatoes".[5]

Their plea did not go unanswered by the Poor Law Commissioners. And since it coincided with a period of prosperity and expansion in the cotton industry of the North of England, it seemed to the authorities an ideal solution for the surplus labour to be moved from Bledlow to the burgeoning factories of Lancashire and Cheshire. To this end, the day following the receipt of the petition in London, an Assistant Commissioner from the Poor Law authorities travelled down to Bledlow to examine the situation at first hand. He found the parish in a state of utter confusion. Many of the unemployed men were lying idly under the hedges, or else were out poaching. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the parish overseer was universally disliked, his ploughs and agricultural implements being frequently the subject of night-time attacks and a bullet having on one occasion been "fired into his son's bedroom". The burden of the poor rates was so great that the entire community was being forced to the verge of destitution, and the paupers, for their part, had refused to take work available fifteen miles away at Tring, on the railways. (Their reluctance is perhaps understandable, for it is difficult to see where they and their families could have been accommodated, if they had decided to move home, and if they had continued to reside in Bledlow, the men would have found it extremely difficult to visit their families regularly.)

In these circumstances, the Assistant Commissioner suggested that profitable employment might be obtained in the Northern factories. After initial reluctance, two families decided to avail themselves of the offer (although others followed later). Immediately, Edwin Chadwick, Secretary to the Poor Law Commissioners, wrote to certain of the Lancashire and Cheshire millowners to test their willingness to accept the labourers. Some of them agreed to do so, and in the early months of 1835, a number of the Bledlow paupers found new employment in the "dark satanic mills" of Lancashire and Cheshire. They and their furniture were transported to their new homes by canal boat, the parish poor rate meeting the cost of the operation.[6]

The first families were accompanied by a parish poor law officer, to help

them on the journey, and one can well imagine that the help would be needed. To poor and illiterate people who had never stirred from their own quiet corner of Buckinghamshire the move must have been almost as exciting and as frightening as a voyage to the other side of the world.

All of the Bledlow migrant families were engaged on contracts of at least two or three years' duration by their new employers. Four of them were engaged by the Ashworths, a Quaker family, in their mills at Turton and Egerton, near Bolton. The first family here was that of Joseph Stevens, his wife and seven children, who arrived in March, 1835. Stevens himself had been working as a farm labourer at Bledlow, for 7s. a week—when he could obtain full employment. In his first year at the Ashworths' mill, where he was given work as a jobbing labourer, he was paid 10s. per week. This, plus the earnings of four of his children, who were employed in the mill, led to a total family income of about 28s. per week—compared with the 14s. or so earned in Bledlow.[7]

The second family was that of George Allen, who migrated with his wife and seven children, plus two orphan boys (aged 16 and 14, respectively), for whom he had become guardian. The boys' mother had apparently committed suicide and their father had absconded, leaving them to the tender mercies of the parish. Allen himself was paid 12s. per week as a farm servant, gardener, etc., while two of his own children and the two orphans also found employment.

The two remaining Bledlow families employed by the Ashworths were Joseph Shepherd, who migrated with his wife and nine children, and James Fryer, who was accompanied by his wife and seven children.[8] The large size of the families involved is significant, for it was noted by the Poor Law Commissioners that parents with numerous children made the best migrants, since the adult men could not acquire "the requisite skill for the superior processes" of the factories, and if employed in the mills they "would not rise beyond . . . the inferior and worst paid occupations. . . ."[9]

Altogether, these four families numbered forty persons, and of that total, twenty-two were able to commence working immediately they reached their new home.

The Ashworths were not, of course, the only millowners involved in the migration. In January, 1835, two families were despatched from Bledlow to Quarry Bank, Styal, near Wilmslow, in Cheshire, where they were employed in a country mill belonging to Samuel Greg & Co. These two families were the real pioneers of the entire migration movement. The head of each of them was employed by the Gregs on their farm, while the older children worked "in the mill as many hours as the law allow(ed)". In both cases the families were engaged as a complete unit, so that the Howlett family—comprising the father and four children who worked in the mill—was paid 24s. per week during the first year of employment. Similarly, the Stevens family, including John Stevens and the four of his nine children old enough to work, received 26s. per week for their first year.[10] Stevens had, incidentally, been one of the prime movers behind the preparation of the petition in the previous December and it is significant that he was one of the first to leave Bledlow when the opportunity occurred.[11]

The families themselves seemed well satisfied with their change of fortune and because of the "favourable report" given by them in letters written home

to Bledlow, a third family from the village was engaged by the Gregs in March, 1835. This comprised a widow, Hannah Veary, and her six children. Mrs. Veary did not work, but five of the children did, and they earned a total of 20s. per week during their first year.

After this initial success the Poor Law Commissioners continued for some time to interest themselves in the problems of Bledlow and its paupers, and to advocate migration—and even emigration—as a means of relieving their poverty. Altogether, eighty-three Bledlow inhabitants migrated to the north of England during the course of 1835. In the following year, thirteen other parishioners—seven adults and six children—emigrated to Canada under the aegis of the Poor Law authorities.[12]

There is little doubt that the movement of population reduced the heavy poor relief burden in the village—to the advantage of the rate payers. During the year ending 25th March, 1835, £1,474 14s. had been expended on poor relief; by the year ending 25th March, 1836, the expenditure had fallen to £802 2s.[13] Nor was the improvement merely a temporary one. During the year ending Lady Day, 1841, Bledlow's total poor rate levy amounted to £750, and in the following year to £734. These figures present a very different picture from the situation a decade earlier.[14]

Significantly, the pioneering example of Bledlow was followed by other Buckinghamshire parishes, including nearby Princes Risborough; in addition, the publicity given to the project in the *Manchester Guardian* helped to attract attention from even farther afield—from Cranfield, in Bedfordshire, for example, and also from the counties of Suffolk and Norfolk. By 1836, agricultural migrants had been despatched in this way from at least fifteen different counties in England, and the movement was only halted by the serious recession in the cotton industry during the later 1830's. (In this recession many of the agrarian migrants unfortunately found themselves thrown out of work and in considerable financial difficulties.)[15]

Finally, if the wealthier members of the Bledlow community welcomed a policy which relieved them of some of their poor rate liabilities, how did the labourers themselves regard the move? In general, they seem to have been well satisfied. John Stevens, pointing to his house (No. 5 Oak Cottages) and furniture at Quarry Bank mill, expressed his gratitude for the change and declared, "that all the horses in Buckinghamshire should not draw him back again." The Howlett and Veary families and those employed by the Ashworths appeared equally happy with their change of home. Joseph Stevens, who worked at the Ashworths' Egerton mill and had migrated with his wife and seven children, probably expressed the view of the majority, when he stated, "he would not go back to Bledlow if all his expenses were paid, and money given to induce him to do so, because he (found) this country (Lancashire) so much better for his children . . ."[16] It is significant that several months after the migration had taken place only "five or six" people, in all, had returned to Bledlow.

For the millowners, of course, pauper labour had the great attraction of commanding relatively low wages. Frances Collier has made this point very clearly in connection with the Gregs' Quarry Bank mill, in her book, *The Family Economy of the Working Classes in the Cotton Industry* 1784–1833, (1964, p. 43):

". . . the low wages they offered would not attract town labour, and therefore they communicated with parish officers, who put them into touch with needy and suitable families. To those eking out a miserable existence with the assistance of poor relief, work in this mill meant a good house and decent food and clothing, instead of a wretched hovel, starvation and rags." Because of the pleasant surroundings and good living accommodation provided at Quarry Bank, many families continued to remain there even when their initial contracts had expired.

This was certainly true of the Bledlow families, whose original contracts would have expired in 1837. At the time of the 1841 Census of Population all three of the families were still working at Styal and living in cottages belonging to the Gregs.[17] And even ten years later, in 1851, one family at least remained in their original home; this was the family of John Howlett and his second wife, Mary. In addition, two of the older Howlett daughters had by this time married locally, and one of them continued to work in the mill, as a throstler.[18]

In this way, therefore, the Bledlow migrants—and others like them—gradually became absorbed into the life of the new northern industrial communities—just as did the Buckinghamshire-born mother and aunt of the heroine in Mrs. Gaskell's novel, *Mary Barton!*

[1] E. L. Jones, The Development of English Agriculture 1815–73 (1968), pp. 31–32; W. Hasbach, A History of the English Agricultural Labourer (1966 edn.), pp. 183–185.

[2] See E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, Captain Swing (1969), pp. 143–150, for an account of the riots in Buckinghamshire.

[3] 1831 Census of Population, Parliamentary Papers, 1833, Vol. XXXVI.

[4] First Annual Report of Poor Law Commissioners, Parliamentary Papers, 1835, Vol. XXV, Appendix D, p. 234.

[5] First Annual Report of Poor Law Commissioners, Parliamentary Papers, 1835, Vol. XXV, Appendix C, No. 5, pp. 347–349.

[6] Ibid. Appendix B, No. 6, Mr. Gilbert's Report on Buckinghamshire, p. 248. According to one factory owner, Henry Ashworth, arrangements for the employment of "two or three families" of the Bledlow poor were finalized by "a young gentleman" from Bledlow calling on the Ashworths in February, 1835. See letter from Henry Ashworth, dated 13th February, 1835, to Edwin Chadwick in *Return on Labourers' Removal*, Parliamentary Papers, 1843, Vol. XLV, No. 254, pp. 4 and 5.

[7] First Annual Report of Poor Law Commissioners, Appendix C, No. 5. Letter from H. and E. Ashworth, dated 27th June, 1835, p. 353.

[8] Ibid., pp. 353–355.

[9] First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, Appendix B, No. 11. Dr. Kay's Report on the Migration of Labourers, p. 313. However, a number even of the younger workers required several months before they could acquire even an average skill, as Mr. Greg of Quarry Bank mill pointed out. Ibid., Appendix B, No. 11, p. 330.

[10] Ibid., Appendix C, No. 5, Letter from R. Greg, dated 14th July, 1835, pp. 356–357. At the time of the 1841 Census of Population, Mrs. Stevens, too, was working—but as a dressmaker. 1841 Population Return for the parish of Wilmslow (Pownal Fee) at Public Record Office, H.O. 107.115.

[11] First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, Appendix C, No. 5, pp. 347–349.

[12] Second Annual Report of Poor Law Commissioners, Parliamentary Papers, 1836, Vol. XXIX, Part I, Appendix B, p. 443.

[13] Second Annual Report of Poor Law Commissioners, Parliamentary Papers, 1836, Vol. XXIX, Part II, Appendix E, pp. 14 and 15.

[14] Return of the Total Amount of Money Levied for Poor Rates for years ending Lady Day, 1839–42, by parishes. Parliamentary Papers, 1844, Vol. XL, No. 63.

[15] A. Redford, Labour Migration in England 1800–1850 (1964 edn.), pp. 106–117. Poor law migration ceased in the spring of 1837.

[16] First Annual Report of Poor Law Commissioners, Appendix B, No. 11, pp. 318–319.

[17] In 1841, all of the Bledlow families' offspring over the age of 10 who were still living at home worked in the mill. This made a total of 14 persons, of whom 6 were weavers, 4 were spinners and 4

were engaged in various tasks. However, both John Howlett and John Stevens, the heads of their families, were still working as agricultural labourers. 1841 Census of Population for Wilmslow (Pownal Fee), Public Record Office, H.O. 107.115.

[18] 1851 Census of Population for Wilmslow (Pownal Fee), Public Record Office, H.O. 107.2162. Ann Howlett, now aged 28, had married James Banshaw, a tailor, and Celia Howlett, aged 26, had married Henry Pearson, an agricultural labourer.