

THE GAWCOTT REVOLT OF 1867

PAMELA L. R. HORN

'Consider'n how much provisions do come,
Ten shilluns a week, I must own, 's a small sum
And if there's a strike as is anyways fair,
'Tis such as the strike up nigh Buckingham there.'

(*Buckingham Advertiser* of 30th March, 1867, quoting from *Punch*.)

At first sight any connection between the Buckinghamshire hamlet of Gawcott and Karl Marx's major work *Das Kapital*, appears extremely unlikely. Nevertheless such a link does exist, for a strike among the hamlet's agricultural labourers in the spring 1867 was hailed by Marx as an event of great significance, affecting what he termed 'one of the most downtrodden agricultural districts of England.' To him it was an indication 'that the movement of the English agricultural proletariat, which had been completely arrested after the suppression of the turbulent manifestations that followed the events of 1830 and after the introduction of the new Poor Law' had now revived.¹ Nor was Marx alone in reporting this seemingly unexpected event, for *The Times* of 18th March contained a full account of it, and the *Annual Register* for 1867 devoted more than a page to a discussion of what it called 'a novel strike.' The local press was equally attentive.

In these circumstances, therefore, the facts surrounding the dispute deserve examination, coming as they did five years before the major upsurge of agricultural trade unionism which is associated with the name of Joseph Arch and the National Agricultural Labourers' Union which he helped to found in May, 1872.²

Although Gawcott is situated only one and a half miles from the town of Buckingham, in mid-Victorian times it was an essentially rural community, whose inhabitants depended for their livelihood upon agriculture and the cottage lace industry. At the time of the 1861 Census of Population no less than 115 of its 286 male inhabitants (including children) were classified as agricultural labourers, while eighty-eight women and girls (or nearly one-third of the total female population) were recorded as lacemakers. Most of them were the wives and daughters of farm labourers.³

The 1860s was a difficult decade for the pillow lace trade, partly on account of the growing competition of cheaper machine-made lace, and partly because

¹Karl Marx, *Capital* (Vol. 1), (Everyman edn., 1931), p.255. The strike also obtains a brief mention in S. & B. Webb, *History of Trade Unionism* (London, 1920 edn.), p. 328.

²For a discussion of the career of Joseph Arch see, for example, Pamela Horn, *Joseph Arch* (Kington, 1971), and Reg Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle!* (London, 1949).

³See Census Return for 1861 at Public Record Office, R.G.9.878.

changes in fashion reduced overall demand for the product. As early as 1862 John Biss, a Buckingham lace dealer and grocer, had informed the *Children's Employment Commission* that local lacemakers were working from daybreak until 9 or 10 o'clock at night in order to earn the meagre sum of 3s. per week. Some secured still less: 'An indifferent girl would hardly make over a farthing an hour', and out of this she would have to buy her own thread, patterns and other materials.⁴ Biss declared that he had been engaged in the lace trade for twenty-four years and although its prosperity had been declining for some time, it was only in the recent past that the most rapid collapse had occurred. And to add to the hardships of the workers, such earnings as they did secure were not always paid in cash but rather in items of grocery or drapery, calculated by the dealers on a basis disadvantageous to the lacemakers.

Yet at a time when opportunities for the women and girls of Gawcott to contribute to family income were being eroded in this manner, the basic weekly wage rates of their menfolk remained static at around 9s. or 10s. per week in winter and 11s. during the spring and summer seasons. Food prices, on the other hand, were rising and during the winter of 1866 there were complaints that a 4-lb. loaf in the Gawcott area was costing 8d.; even in the spring of 1867 it had fallen only a little, to 7½d. 'Firing' cost most families about 1s. per week, and cottage rent approximately 1s. 6d.—although in the matter of housing Gawcott was badly placed. A report in the *Morning Star* newspaper during 1863 revealed that 32 of the 87 labourers' cottages in the hamlet had only one bedroom and many were in a poor state of repair; the newspaper's conclusions were confirmed five years later by George Culley, Assistant Commissioner in connection with the *Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture*.⁵

Giving these underlying grounds for discontent, therefore, but little provocation was needed to bring about open revolt. Two events in the spring of 1867 served to achieve this. The first was associated with political unrest surrounding demands for a widening of the franchise and the passage of a new Reform Bill. Among local men particularly active in this agitation were three Buckingham tradesmen, John Small, a baker and corn chandler, Thomas Baker, a shoemaker, and John Biss, lace dealer and grocer. These men made it their business to address meetings on the franchise question in several of the surrounding villages and on the 21st February they came to Gawcott. Proceedings commenced with a tea for over one hundred people provided in a barn belonging to a young Gawcott smallholder named Thomas Small, but as soon as the meal had ended pro-Reform speeches were quickly under way. Several of the local labourers took a full part in these and a few days later decided to join with the Buckingham reformers in holding evening meetings at nearby Padbury and Pres-

⁴ *First Report of the Children's Employment Commission*, Parliamentary Papers, Vol. XVIII, Evidence on pillow lacemaking, pp. 259-260. For a discussion of the Buckinghamshire lace trade see Raie Clare, 'The History of Lacemaking' in *Bucks Life*, April, 1969, and Thomas Wright, *The Romance of the Lace Pillow* (Olney, 1919). Pamela Horn, 'Pillow Lacemaking in Victorian England: The Experience of Oxfordshire' in *Textile History*, Vol. 3, December, 1972, discusses some of the reasons for, and effects of, the collapse of this cottage industry in the later nineteenth century.

⁵ *First Report of the Royal Commission of the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture*, Parliamentary Papers, 1867-68, Vol. XVII, Evidence submitted by Mr. G. Culley on Buckinghamshire, p. 530.

ton Bissett. To add to the drama of these nightly gatherings, the men marched in procession holding lighted torches.⁶ And as their involvement in the franchise issue grew, so dissatisfaction with their economic conditions became stronger.⁷

To add to this came a second cause of aggravation, namely the rumour that labourers at nearby Brackley had secured an advance of 1s. or 2s. per week in their basic wages. On hearing this the Gawcott men decided to take action themselves, and early in March submitted a claim for a basic rate of 12s. per week, plus 1s. for Sunday working.⁸ The farmers not only rejected the demand, but dismissed some of those most active in promoting the cause. At this, twenty-eight other labourers in the hamlet came out on strike, both to support their wage claim and to show solidarity with their victimised fellows.

The Buckingham franchise reformers also stepped into the fray, forming a Strike Committee to appeal for funds and issuing an address on behalf of the strikers in which attention was drawn to the fact that all previous attempts to obtain higher wages had been treated with derision by the employers: 'We have nothing left for the clothier, draper, butcher, shoemaker, &c. Where are we labourers with our industry? Why, on the verge of pauperism. We ask that we may live—not as paupers, but by our own industry.'⁹

John Biss became honorary secretary of the Strike Committee as well as organiser of a registry office established to deal with offers of employment which might be forthcoming from other parts of the country. John Small was chairman of the Committee and Thomas Baker, honorary treasurer. Baker seems to have been the most energetic of the three, quickly writing to the *Morning Star* to draw attention to the dispute, and appealing for help. From this, the news was picked up by *The Times* and, as has been seen, by other newspapers and journals as well. Thanks to the publicity, much-needed cash began to flow in to support the men, coming from as far afield as Yorkshire, Manchester and London. By 23rd March over £24 had been received, in addition to offers of better-paid employment elsewhere, notably in Yorkshire. Some of the more resourceful labourers took advantage of these opportunities and their removal expenses, and those of their families, were met by the Strike Committee. In other cases, arrangements were made for men to emigrate to Australia and Canada.¹⁰

Meanwhile, within Buckinghamshire itself the Gawcott dispute had an immediate effect. Farmers in the nearby parishes of Bierton, Aston Abbots, North Marston and Maids Moreton granted an increase in wages to their labourers in order to forestall possible strike action. At Great Missenden an Agricultural Labourers' Protection Society was formed, and at Ivinghoe a meeting was held to consider the establishment of a union, although in this case nothing positive

⁶ *Buckingham Advertiser*, 23rd February and 2nd March, 1867.

⁷ Thus Thomas Barge of Hillesden wrote to the *Northampton Herald* of 26th March, 1867, stating that he had spoken to one of the labourers at Gawcott, and the man had attributed trouble in the hamlet to 'the spakers (sic) at the Reform Meetings'. At Brackley in Northamptonshire, too, reform demonstrations were believed to have encouraged discontent among the local labourers, according to a letter which appeared in the *Bicester Herald* of 5th July, 1867.

⁸ *Annual Register* for 1867, entry under March, p. 35. *Banbury Guardian*, 21st March, 1867.

⁹ *Annual Register*, p. 36.

¹⁰ *Buckingham Advertiser*, 30th March, 1867 and *The Times*, 6th May, 1867. *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 30th March, 1867, declared that of the labourers who had struck 'nearly all (had) obtained work in distant counties, at an increased rate of wages.'

seems to have been achieved. In addition, the Royal and Central Buckinghamshire Agricultural Association organised a meeting at the George Hotel, Aylesbury, in mid-April at which the Gawcott dispute was discussed by the farmers present.¹¹ Over the county borders, in Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire, labourers were similarly inspired to put forward demands for higher wages.¹²

Yet, despite the concern which it had aroused, the Gawcott dispute was no revolutionary affair. As the *Annual Register* approvingly observed, the strikers conducted themselves 'peacefully and respectfully' towards their former employers, and refrained from 'processions and other things calculated to annoy the farmers.'

The conflict eventually came to an end in late April, when according to *The Times* about one hundred farm labourers from Gawcott and district had been sent to alternative employment elsewhere; it seems likely that these were the most forceful and energetic of the men. (And their removal no doubt weakened the union movement.) In other cases the claim for higher wages was met by local farmers, and with this concession, the major point at issue was removed. Further, even on the political front, grounds for friction were reduced as the much-heralded Reform Bill was now passing through the Commons, having received its second reading on 25th March.¹³ In these circumstances, support for the Union began to dwindle rapidly, despite the efforts of its Buckingham supporters, notably John Small, the baker. He rather eccentrically combined an advertisement in the *Buckingham Advertiser* for his own 'pure and sweet' bread and 'good and cheap' flour with a notice about the Buckingham Farm Labourers' Union—'Entrance fee sixpence.' Although the advertisement appeared for two months, from mid-May until mid-July, his efforts proved abortive. Five more years were to elapse before agricultural trade unionism again appeared in Buckinghamshire, and it is noticeable that on this occasion neither Buckingham nor Gawcott was a major centre of agitation.¹⁴

¹¹*Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 27th April, 1867.

¹² See Pamela Horn, 'The Evenley Strike in 1867' in *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, Vol. IV, No. 1, 1966, pp. 47-50.

¹³ The bill received the royal assent on 15th August, 1867.

¹⁴ For details of the rural union agitation in Buckinghamshire during the early months of 1872 see *Bucks Advertiser*, 18th May, 1872, for example.