

## **The Dorchester Labourers and Swing's aftermath in Dorset, 1830-1838**

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The arrest and transportation of the Dorchester Labourers (also known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs) in 1834 has become a key moment in British labour history and the popular memory of trade unionism. The six Labourers, led by George Loveless, a prominent Methodist lay preacher, were arrested on the initiative of the local landowner and magistrate, James Frampton, for having formed the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers (FSAL) in the village of Tolpuddle in east Dorset in autumn 1833. The resulting national solidarity campaign became an extensive and assertive defence of the rights of labour and of working-class political radicalism, which succeeded in securing the men pardons in 1836. The case of the Labourers has subsequently appeared in a book-length popular history, been analysed in terms of the nature and aims of the broader trade union movement, and situated within long-term changes within agrarian labour and social relations across the south.<sup>1</sup> However, consistently missing from these studies has been their situation within the context of labour and political disputes within Dorset itself during the entirety of the 1830s. Almost totally overlooked, other than brief discussion of its Chartist dimension, has been the fact that the FSAL was re-established in 1838, becoming far larger than in 1834.<sup>2</sup>

The Swing riots began in Dorset on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1830, with the most concentrated and violent events ending on December 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>3</sup> As with the other affected areas, Swing in Dorset consisted mainly of localised and fragmented rioting, assemblies to demand higher wages, strikes, incendiarism, and machine breaking. It secured for labourers temporary wage increases and more generous provision of relief, however these were rescinded between 1831 and 1832 despite assurances by magistrates to make them permanent. This wage repression directly led to the formation of the FSAL, which quickly expanded to encompass much of the core region of the previous Swing disturbances. This direct relation of Swing to the FSAL is important since it

speaks to recent trends within the historiographies of labour and protest. The literature on Swing and collective protest have moved away from ‘grand narratives’ of class consciousness, antagonism and politicisation, to an emphasis on the local characteristics of disturbances and disputes. This was most clearly outlined by Peter Jones, who argued that the idea of Swing as a ‘movement’ against embryonic capitalism should be rejected in favour of a parochially-based approach that sees its structure more akin to ‘ripples in a pond’ and its aims consciously localised.<sup>4</sup> This revisionist approach has challenged the broader strokes of Marxist labour history, most emblematic in Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé’s monumental *Captain Swing*.<sup>5</sup> Instead, discrete case studies have been used to demonstrate Swing as a diverse and distinctive array of protests that do not fit easily into a movement with universal causes or objectives.<sup>6</sup>

The case of Dorset in the 1830s indicates the points of contact between these customary, fragmented forms of protest and dissent and an innovative movement conceived in terms of class antagonism. George Loveless himself explicitly referred to the FSAL as part of ‘a general movement of the working class’ that developed as a response to the ending of the wage concessions in 1831.<sup>7</sup> Complementing Carl Griffin’s study of the south-east which revises the timing of Swing’s endpoint from winter 1830 to 1833, this article argues that in east Dorset there was a clear movement to develop these continuing protests into something structured and long-term.<sup>8</sup> Utilising the membership list, rules and oath of the FSAL, which have never before been consulted by historians, and emphasising the writings of George Loveless and Frampton, the magistrate most militantly involved in the decade’s disputes, this article will develop a detailed micro-study.<sup>9</sup> Although initially Swing was not a movement since participants consciously contained their protests ‘within their locality’, in Dorset it directly led to a unified, widespread, well-organized movement which in 1834 and again in 1838 possessed members in numerous parishes, all with the same aims and demands.<sup>10</sup> A revision of the Dorchester Labourers therefore provides a remarkably detailed case study of the intellectual, social and political fallout of Swing amongst labourers in the rural south west.

A return to these 'usual suspects' of labour history also speaks to wider debates about the nature, methods and relevance of labour history today.<sup>11</sup> The Labourers have generally been regarded as an 'almost embarrassing...but apparently isolated and exceptional episode' in the history of labour and rural society, but this notion of them as an aberration has led to neglect of their own motives and how they fitted into the social and cultural relations of their own locality.<sup>12</sup> One emphasis here will be a response to the growing interest in a 'history from above' to complement the more traditional 'history from below'.<sup>13</sup> The metamorphosis of Swing from localised disputes into a movement of organized labour was directly due to the policy of the local elite of implementing wage increases across all parishes, the breaking of which seen by labourers as an abrogation of the obligations within the moral economy, a process Griffin also noted in the south east.<sup>14</sup> The reformation of the union in 1838 was similarly fuelled by popular anger over the imposition of the new Poor Law, which in turn was the method through which landowners and farmers reasserted their control over the labourers.<sup>15</sup> While the unionisation in eastern Dorset was a remarkably novel attempt by labourers to displace older forms of protest and negotiation, it was nevertheless fuelled by customary expectations.<sup>16</sup>

However, an emphasis on the intellectual and cultural context of the FSAL also illustrates the extent and significance of its breach with customary society. The auto-biographical political tracts of George Loveless are abundant but notably underutilised sources which allow a new avenue for research on the Labourers than purely their place in broad agrarian socio-economic change.<sup>17</sup> Dissatisfaction with parochial protests and negotiations with masters led these labourers to seek new ways of understanding and organising their situation, an innovation born of their local community and experience. This development suggests that historians should be wary of crafting an arbitrary division between a 'newer' emphasis on malleable and disparate forms of dispute and protest, and an 'archaic' emphasis on homogenised, organized movements. By utilising the localised approach of the 'new protest history' it is evident that in Dorset these two forms bled into one another.<sup>18</sup>

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The encroachment of Swing disturbances into Hampshire and Wiltshire in early November 1830 led to the first concerns within Dorset that the county's apparent tranquillity would be tested, with the *Dorset County Chronicle* unable to believe that 'any of these proceedings originate with our peasantry'.<sup>19</sup> Their creeping proximity began to alarm the landowners and authorities, particularly since the county's regular soldiers had been sent to deal with disturbances in the eastern counties. As Frampton wrote, the obvious signs of unrest challenged his assumptions about the passivity of Dorset's labourers:

Altho from the very orderly and quiet manner in which the Labourers in Dorsetshire always conducted themselves, I did not expect such violence to extend to this County; yet it was easy to see that the people were getting restless and discontented; & it became necessary therefore for me to take precautions to put a stop to any attempts that might be made to incite them to mischief.<sup>20</sup>

Frampton initiated preparations to reform the Yeomanry Regiment that had been disbanded in 1814, but this had not been completed once protests broke out on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November.<sup>21</sup>

Frampton subsequently spent most of the week swearing in special constables, including a number of volunteers who had served alongside him in the wartime Yeomanry.<sup>22</sup> His exclusively militant response, born of wartime anti-Jacobinism and invasion scares, was unusual amongst the other landowners, who promptly adopted a unified response of a 10s weekly wage to their labourers.<sup>23</sup>

The events in Dorset support Jones's model of consciously localised protests and negotiations that were aware of but not necessarily acting in concert with events in neighbouring parishes. Frampton's sister Mary recalled that this process was started when, following the first risings, Lord Portman 'immediately promised to raise the wages of his labourers, and by doing this without concert with other gentlemen, greatly increased their difficulties.'<sup>24</sup> One of those

gentlemen, John Drax, was angry with Portman since he had intended to offer a wage of 9s but had to raise it to match Portman's 10s.<sup>25</sup> It is evident that labourers were aware of the concessions elsewhere and forced parity during negotiations. Harry Castleman, the son of Lord Anglesey's agent, William, agreed during negotiations with workers at Winborne a 10s rate, with 11s for shepherds and carters, as long as they forewent most forms of relief. The workers refused and Castleman had to give in and offer the wage with no reduction of relief, since 'as long as the rioters continued in the neighbourhood...the labourers have the means of intimidating their employers by refusing to resist or by actually joining them.'<sup>26</sup> By the 26<sup>th</sup>, the 10s concession was being pushed as a unified policy. A friend called on Frampton that night telling him that William Morton Pitt, the former MP for Dorset, was leading a group of magistrates who were demanding that all tenants and landlords increase wages. Frampton was unyielding, replying: 'I was sorry for it – that I disapproved very much of such a promise – that it was only encouraging the people to rise.'<sup>27</sup>

In most cases, both sides of the negotiations were in agreement that there was legitimacy to the labourers' demands and their actions, and that 'solutions should be found locally'.<sup>28</sup> Portman's concessions to his labourers took place in a face to face meeting where he gave them all beer, while Drax negotiated with his in an alehouse in Bere.<sup>29</sup> When Frampton arrived there to speak to Drax he enraged him by asserting that his labourers' demands were correct, that they were not guilty of intimidation, and that his tenants should not join the special constables, prompting Frampton to consider him a 'madman'.<sup>30</sup> The papers of Lord Anglesey's estate document the efforts of the tenants, clergy and Anglesey in finding a solution. The tenant farmers wrote to Anglesey that they were 'moved by the destitution of the Labouring Classes' and demanded lower rents so that they could raise their wages and hire more of the unemployed, while Castleman's hostility towards the labourer's demands was repeatedly attacked by a local clergyman who sought to establish allotments in parish land.<sup>31</sup> Castleman had to negotiate to get reluctant labourers to join the special constables, while there were reports in the *Dorset County*

*Chronicle* of labourers volunteering to be sworn in return for higher wages and promises to prosecute exploitative food merchants.<sup>32</sup> In short, as Jones has argued, Swing was a conscious attempt to reassert the principles and customs of the moral economy in the dealings between labourers, their employers, landowners, magistrates and clergy.<sup>33</sup> Frampton was therefore unusual in arguing that the magistrates should not, and could not, force a wage increase. He was also unusual in the violence of his refusal to negotiate. At Winfrith on November 27<sup>th</sup> his special constables attacked a group of clearly peaceful petitioners for a wage increase, consisting of men, women and children who, in the words Mary, ‘advanced rather respectfully, and with their hats in their hands, to demand increase of wages’.<sup>34</sup> This resistance marked him out to labourers who consequently threatened to attack his house, which was barricaded until after Christmas.<sup>35</sup>

By the end of Swing in Dorset the situation was similar to most other areas affected by disturbances, where improved wages, relief and extra employment were found for labourers.<sup>36</sup> However, this was temporary. Many of the agreements made on Lord Anglesey’s estate, such as Anglesey himself directly paying the unemployed to work on roads and quarries, were to last only until Lady Day 1831.<sup>37</sup> These agreements did little to improve the labourers’ prospects, and over the winter of 1831 Frampton reported that ‘the people were all uneasy, discontented and sullen, and appeared as if their entire character had suddenly been altered.’<sup>38</sup> Aware of this discontent and the persistence of low wages, by spring of that year many magistrates sought to make these temporary measures permanent, and a meeting was held of the Justices of the eastern portion of Dorset for those ends. In the words of the magistrate who called the meeting, the Revd Henry Yeatman:

...it was deemed advisable by myself, my brother justices, and others, that the “poor and impotent,” and also the able-bodied who were unable to procure employment sufficient for themselves and their helpless families, should also be admitted to a participation of the blessings of that soothing system, which, though late, and extorted from the higher orders of society by fear and terror, it was deemed expedient to adopt at that alarming and distressing period.

The meeting was a conscious reassertion of the tenets of the moral economy. Yeatman was scandalised when Poor Law reform advocate D.O.P. Okeden declared that if any man ‘and his family could not subsist upon their wages, they might lie down and die by the roadside’, noting that only one other magistrate agreed with this ‘extraordinary and unchristian’ doctrine.<sup>39</sup>

However, the meeting agreed on the necessity to implement a ‘uniform’ system of increased wages and relief which would mean ‘that the labourers of one *division* should not be made uneasy and discontented by hearing of the greater amount of both prevailing and adopted *in another*.’

However, by the end of 1831 and throughout 1832 there was a reaction against these agreements, beginning with the wage increases. Yeatman wrote that although ‘several gentlemen in this county made promises to the lower orders’ of an increase of wages ‘from 4s and 6s to the height of 10s and 12s per week’, this promise, ‘now that the alarm and terror of the moment have subsided, has been broken in a manner the most treacherous and dishonourable.’<sup>40</sup> By creating but then rowing back on these agreements, the landowners and magistrates directly created the conditions that led to the formation of the FSAL.

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Frampton, in his letters to Melbourne during the trial of the Dorchester Labourers, reported that during Swing a group had gathered together in Tolpuddle determined to join the rioters in nearby Puddletown. He claims to have been told by an anonymous farmer that George and James Loveless were both in the crowd, encouraging riot, a charge that George denied and which seems suspect given that no witness claimed such during the trial.<sup>41</sup> Even though the Lovelesses were unlikely to have directly participated, they were certainly concerned with the underlying disputes over wages and relief, which George was to take a lead in. Loveless wrote in *The Victims of Whiggery* that between 1831 and 1832 ‘there was a general movement of the working classes for an increase of wages.’<sup>42</sup> This movement had already been identified by Frampton in summer 1831, who reported ‘there can be no doubt that there is a very great uneasiness amongst the

lower orders...the conversations at the Beer Houses & alehouses is of a very discontented & unpleasant kind &...the Labouring Classes think they did themselves a great deal of good by the mobs of last year.’<sup>43</sup>

Loveless’s account correlates with Yeatman’s description of both the magistrates’ agreements, and their subsequent abandoning of the wage concessions. He reported that when in 1831 a group of men from Tolpuddle approached their masters for a wage increase, the masters promised to give them ‘as much for their labour as the other masters in the district.’<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, when they discovered that their wage of 9s was lower than the 10s given in other districts they were rebuffed when they asked for an increase. The wage then dropped to 8s, following which the labourers turned to Pitt for advice, who told them to nominate delegates to visit Frampton, who would mediate between them and their employers. The Tolpuddle labourers then voted Loveless their representative. Frampton argued to this delegation, as he had during Swing, that magistrates could not compel employers to give a certain wage. This angered Loveless, given that an agreement had already been made between the labourers and their masters for parity of their wages with those in neighbouring parishes. Furthermore, he was disgusted that a witness of that earlier agreement, the ‘hireling parson’ Reverend Warren, swore that no such agreement had taken place, even though he himself had given his word that he would make sure it was honoured and that they would receive an increase.<sup>45</sup> Following this the Tolpuddle wage dropped to 7s, then 6s per week.<sup>46</sup>

In negotiating directly with magistrates and clergy and electing Loveless a delegate to these ends, the labourers of Tolpuddle were operating within the customs of both the moral economy and everyday relations between labourers and masters.<sup>47</sup> The local authorities, however, failed to operate within those customs, despite their reaffirmation following Swing. In response, Loveless and the villagers met together and resolved to form ‘a friendly society amongst the labourers’, something that George knew how to accomplish since he had ‘seen at different times accounts



of 'Trade Societies'.<sup>48</sup> While 'unionist mentalities were central to Swing', the conversion of these mentalities into actual unionisation was a substantial shift in the way labourers sought to relate to the elite.<sup>49</sup> As Jones highlights, while wages, relief and the right to work were all clear objectives of Swing events, so too was the granting of money, provisions or alcohol in forms of extortion justified as customary gifts.<sup>50</sup> In contrast the FSAL made clear in its rules that its two objectives were to strike if wages were lowered or if any member was dismissed for being in the FSAL.<sup>51</sup> Wages were now the sole emphasis of the labourers, evident in the requirement of members to 'before Almighty God, and this Loyal Lodge, most solemnly swear that I will...do my best for the support of wages'.<sup>52</sup> This focus was a deliberate effort to avoid any other means of securing subsistence, and as such a clear and conscious departure from the sort of protest and negotiation seen in 1830. Furthermore, the union was also a deliberate effort to avoid the sorts of customary 'everyday resistance', such as crime, gleaning, or begging, which has been uncovered in recent historiography.<sup>53</sup> As Loveless wrote, the labourers sought to unionise because 'it was impossible to live honestly on such scanty means', while the oath required members to pledge that they will 'not work with any illegal man or men'.<sup>54</sup>

The impetus to organise was mainly the Lovelesses'. Loveless wrote that at the end of October 1833 two delegates from a 'Trade Society' visited Tolpuddle and 'formed a Friendly Society amongst the labourers, and gave us directions how to proceed.'<sup>55</sup> Following Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Joyce Marlow wrote that the organisation of the FSAL was undertaken by a delegation from the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (GNCTU), but as W.H. Oliver had already pointed out the FSAL was five months older than the GNCTU.<sup>56</sup> In fact, George wrote to his brother Robert in London, who was a flax dresser who had been unionised since July 1833.<sup>57</sup> As the Radical MPs John Arthur Roebuck and Thomas Wakley both argued, these London unions had been unmolested by the state, and Robert therefore told George that if he established one in Dorset it would be legal.<sup>58</sup> Loveless told the authorities in Van Diemen's Land that Robert sent the two delegates from London, and these men led a meeting of forty labourers in Thomas

Standfield's cottage. While they initiated them with an oath and told them basic rules, they were also clear that they had 'paid us a visit merely for our benefit', and that they did not require them to communicate with the London unions by 'Delegates or by letter'.<sup>59</sup> After they left, George's brother John Loveless, a unionised flax dresser who lived just outside Bridport in west Dorset, rendered assistance. He visited Tolpuddle in October 1833, and gave George a leaflet entitled *To the Flax and Hemp Trade of Great Britain*, written in Leeds on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1832.<sup>60</sup> This was evidently part of a broader effort to unionise flax dressers, as another copy of this leaflet was forwarded to the Home Office from a village near Yeovil in July 1833 (around twenty miles north of Bridport), with a note encouraging the recipient to pass it on. The leaflet was important to Loveless, since he remarked upon it being taken from him that 'it was the cause of their being there now'.<sup>61</sup> When compared to the FSAL's rules taken from George Loveless's house upon his arrest, the rules set out in this pamphlet and those expressed by the delegates who visited Tolpuddle are clearly the FSAL's direct influences.<sup>62</sup> Therefore although by the end of March 1834 the GNCTU saw 'Toll-puddle' as serving as the 'grand lodge' for an affiliated union of Dorset farm labourers, in its origins the FSAL was certainly established on the model of flax dressers' unions, and mainly by the agency of these three brothers.<sup>63</sup>

While the delegates are therefore important, their existence should not detract from the energy of the local leadership or the local enthusiasm for the FSAL. This is evident in the stages of the union's development and the extent of its membership and organisation, which can be gleaned from the rules and membership list of the Tolpuddle lodge.<sup>64</sup> The first wave of initiation began in November 1833 and consisted of men from Tolpuddle or Affpuddle, a small settlement less than a mile away from the village. According to Edward Legg and John Lock, the informers who testified for the prosecution at the trial, themselves, Richard Percy, Elias Riggs and Henry Courtenay were sworn on the meeting on December 7<sup>th</sup>.<sup>65</sup> All of these men were from Affpuddle, but after Christmas, the Society began expanding to more distant villages, most of which surrounded Tolpuddle in a roughly two mile radius. William House was from Puddletown,

while Edward Davis lived in Piddletrenthide, eight miles away. James Puckett and Thomas Crumpler both lived in Tinkleton. Peter Adams was most likely a member of the large Adams family that lived in Dewlish, a short walk from Tolpuddle and where George's wife Elizabeth had grown up. Significantly, all of these men joined on or after January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1834, unlike the Tolpuddle and Affpuddle men who mainly joined in November and December, suggesting that once a large base had been formed in Tolpuddle the Friendly Society's organizers were pushing out into towns and villages further afield. The Piddle Valley, which included Tolpuddle, Affpuddle, Puddletown and Piddletrenthide, had seen numerous Swing assemblies and events.<sup>66</sup>

The FSAL's origins were therefore intimate and localised. Alongside the Loveless and Standfield families who formed the leadership (George and Thomas Standfield were also brothers-in-law), the Cope, House, Daniel, Oliver and Briggs families all had more than one member in the Tolpuddle lodge. Nevertheless its inter-parochial nature is also important to emphasise. In its rules, it was made clear that the Society should possess a lodge in each parish.<sup>67</sup> The second lodge was in Bere, where meetings were held twice a week in the house of George Romaine, a Methodist preacher who was also the secretary of the FSAL.<sup>68</sup> According to Frampton Romaine's house was 'situated on a very wild heath with only a few cottages near it' but despite this 'we have had repeated information that from twenty to thirty persons at least pass at a time thro' Bere and also come from other villages into which it has extended rapidly'.<sup>69</sup> This lodge was attended by labourers from the Bere heath, Winfrith and Wool regions, all locations of significant assemblies of workers during Swing, including the sizable one at Winfrith that Frampton had violently broken up. By March, the FSAL was beginning to expand further north, into the Blackmore Vale, the home of the majority of those arrested during Swing. A carter passing through Bere was given a paper with instructions to show it to working people in his home at Hazelbury, twelve miles north of Bere, and then send it on to Mappowder, a village in the Vale around twenty miles north from Bere.<sup>70</sup> Frampton also reported 'great numbers' in the Blandford region, which had also seen numerous Swing events.<sup>71</sup>

The FSAL was therefore a direct continuation of the Swing disputes. It was also evidence of a clearly cohesive and energetic intellectual culture amongst the region's labourers. Of the arrestees, George Loveless, his brother James, and Thomas and John Stanfield were all lay preachers. Tolpuddle was a key part of Dorset's Methodist community, 'the centre of religious exertion' between 1809 and 1816 when there was steady Methodist expansion throughout the county.<sup>72</sup> In 1818 the first chapel in the county was established in Tolpuddle on land owned by the Loveless and Stanfield families, making them the most influential and firmly-rooted Methodist preachers.<sup>73</sup> The remarkable expansion of the FSAL was likely due to this experience, further indicated by that fact that many of its members came from settlements that appear on the circuit plan followed by George and his brothers James and William, although a number of members of the union were Anglican or baptised their children in Anglican churches. Alongside practical experience of leadership, Methodism also directly led to politicisation. While political belief or motive has largely been downplayed in study of the Labourers, this has only been possible by ignoring the radicalism evident in Loveless's two writings, *The Victims of Whiggery* and *The Church Shown Up*, published through the London Radicals John Cleave, Henry Hetherington and James Watson.<sup>74</sup>

This is particularly true of *The Church Shown Up*, which was addressed to a local Vicar who had written a letter to the President of the Wesleyan Connexion attacking Loveless; this pamphlet was Loveless's reply, an attack on Anglicanism. *The Church Shown Up* reveals the Wesleyan Loveless to have developed a sophisticated political position that was derived from his theological readings and his interpretation of the ethical teachings of Christ. Most notably, he was passionately opposed to the state church, and like many plebeian dissenters and free-thinkers he favoured a sceptical reading of early Christianity. Religion was not 'first established in grandeur and all the pomp of state', but was spread by fishermen from Galilee, who 'went forth and proclaimed "liberty to the captives and the opening of the prisons to them that were bound"'.<sup>75</sup> Redemption was to be the work of humble free-thinkers, who, literate and

increasingly confident, would overthrow the clergy: 'the working classes are beginning to question their value and utility, and to think that they can do without [the clergy's] assistance.'<sup>76</sup> The new creation was to be a world in line with God's plan, with no obfuscation from the corrupt Anglican establishment, but also not from the landowners: 'the earth was given to man for an inheritance and not to become the property of individuals.'<sup>77</sup> Loveless's Methodism was therefore far from the conservative, quietist philosophy condemned by E.P. Thompson as 'ritualised psychic masturbation'.<sup>78</sup>

This was more than simply an intellectual position. The liberty Loveless envisioned was not just liberty of conscience:

The poor are rapidly becoming their own teachers, and it is in vain you try to hoodwink and keep them in darkness...They see that labour is the source of wealth, and that "if there be any true definition of property, is it that which defines it as the thing which man creates by his own labour;" that all men are born naturally free, and that all have an unalienable right to receive a sufficient maintenance from the land that gave them birth; that they are kept in poverty and degradation by those who, living in luxury and idleness upon the fruits of their labour, tell the working man his portion is to labour, to suffer, and to die.<sup>79</sup>

Painite radicalism, the labour theory of value, and Methodist ethics were all merged by Loveless into a critique of not just the state church, but of the political, economic and social establishment into which it was enmeshed. Envisioning his right to higher wages and relief as a consequence of his own labour, rather than as based in a moral right to subsistence, was a major departure from the tenets of the moral economy and indicates amongst labourers a critical attitude towards landlord paternalism. Importantly, this politicisation and class analysis was not an innovation of his persecution and transportation, as he twice made clear in *Victims of Whiggery*:

...nothing will be done to relieve the distress of the working classes, unless they take it into their own hands. With those views I left England, and with those views I am returned...my sentiments

on the subject are unchanged...I am returned from my bondage with my views and principles strengthened. It is indelibly fixed in my mind, that labour is ill-rewarded in consequence of a few tyrannizing over the millions.’<sup>80</sup>

He followed political events as early as 1829, as in *The Church Shown Up* he repeated a story about arguing with an Anglican during the passage of the Catholic Emancipation Bill, thinking ‘it criminal to persecute any man for conscience sake’.<sup>81</sup> He was also informed during the Reform crisis, criticising the clergy’s ‘conduct at the time the Reform Bill was in agitation’, remembering that in the spring 1831 election in Dorset, ‘out of 200 clergymen, 12 only voted from the reform candidate!’<sup>82</sup> This is significant since Dorset was particularly agitated during the Reform crisis, and a by-election in September 1831 for the county seat being won by the Tory Lord Ashley led to extensive rioting by pro-Reformers in Sherborne, Blandford, and Yeovil, all towns with substantial populations of agricultural labourers.<sup>83</sup> He was also interested at the time in the national pro-Reform campaign. Upon being sentenced, Loveless threw the lyrics of the Birmingham Political Union’s hymn sung at its first meeting in 1830 into the crowd, which he had likely taken from a radical newspaper.<sup>84</sup> He would have found it easy to find such reading material. The *Dorset County Chronicle* alleged both during the Swing riots in 1830 and following the Reform riots in 1831 that labourers were incited by Radical prints.<sup>85</sup> Radical publishers based in London, such as Cleave and Hetherington, possessed agents along the Dorset turnpikes, while Richard Carlile had an agent in Dorchester, the town in which he was imprisoned for much of the 1820s.<sup>86</sup> The landowners themselves were well aware of men like Loveless. During the riots Elisabeth Fielding, Ilchester’s sister, wrote to a brother in Moreton promising to send a copy of *The Times*, ‘which had better not be read in the village’ since it was ‘abusing Landlords & saying numberless calumnies of them. So don’t let it go out of your hands.’<sup>87</sup>

As an organisation with a leadership, a membership, funds, a central lodge, a permanent existence, clear rules, and a structure that crossed parish lines, the FSAL was a rupture with the

forms of protest and negotiation seen during Swing. However, it was not simply an imposition by London unionists, as it simultaneously spoke to customs of direct communal negotiation with employers, and it was fuelled by the failure of the authorities to uphold the customary obligations that they themselves had reaffirmed in 1831. The FSAL was therefore a clear effort to continue the Swing disputes but move beyond customary measures of protest, even though it grew from those measures and possessed deep roots in its local culture and society.

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The next stage in the agitation and organisation in the county was the resurrection of the union in 1838. The Chartist dimension of this agitation has been interpreted in Roger Wells' brief study as a failed Chartist expedition by men from London and Bath seeking to subsume trade unionism into Chartism.<sup>88</sup> This has served to obscure the success and extent of the union's re-emergence, the clear involvement of its 1834 membership, and the extent to which it was also a direct successor to Swing. From the outset, Chartism was intimately linked to the Labourers. The People's Charter was in preparation in the summer of 1837, the year the Dorchester Labourers returned to England, and through the Central Dorchester Committee, the organizers of their solidarity campaign, the group became close to many London radicals. Robert Hartwell, the chair of the Committee, was a compositor and a key member of the London Working Men's Association, the organisation that drafted and would promulgate the Charter. George was accepted as an honorary member of the Working Men's Association on 26 September 1837.<sup>89</sup> He returned to Tolpuddle in winter 1838, since he signed *The Church Shown Up* 'Tolpuddle, Dorsetshire, Feb. 1838.' By May, he had gone to London with fellow Labourer James Brine to assist the 'Central Dorchester Committee in carrying out their plans for future operations', and likely stayed and worked with Robert, who acted as the family's agent on the Committee, before returning to Tolpuddle in the summer.<sup>90</sup>

At the beginning of August 1838 Frampton wrote a letter to Lord Russell on behalf of Dorset's magistrates warning: 'the union is going on in great force in Bere Regis and Milton Abbas & the neighbouring villages' and that a 'great many labourers had joined it'. He noted that the union's organizers were working with the London Working Men's Association and that a demonstration was being organized on the 24<sup>th</sup> of that month in the vicinity of Blandford.<sup>91</sup> At the same time Colonel A'court, the Assistant Poor Law Commissioner for the South East, became alarmed by the discontent and took a personal interest in the eastern part of Dorset. Noting that the agitation was growing rapidly and the union was successful in taking on new members, A'court became nervous that the unrest should not be attributed to the new Poor Laws, and to these ends became sympathetic to the labourers' demands: 'It is no longer concealed that the object of the combination is to procure an increase of wages. Can the oppressed labourers be blamed for seeking such an object?'<sup>92</sup>

This was not an effort by meddling Londoners alone, however. A'court reported that the Dorchester Labourers had returned to Dorset the week before the agitation began and in his *History of the Yeomanry*, Frampton recalled the Labourers being 'very active on this occasion'.<sup>93</sup> Importantly, A'court and Frampton both highlight men involved in the 1838 agitation who they claim were also part of the FSAL in 1834. At Spettisbury outside Blandford in early August one hundred labourers assembled opposite the house of William Gallop, who A'court describes as the owner of a small shop and beer seller, but who appears on the 1841 census as an agricultural labourer.<sup>94</sup> Gallop was said to have been involved with the Dorchester Labourers 'and was supposed to have originated the combination for which they were transported', indicating some level of early involvement in the FSAL. He was now attempting to enlist every man in the village into a union that he claimed would be county-wide.<sup>95</sup> Frampton, in his letter to Melbourne, informed him of a man named J. Gillan who had signed a letter attempting to get handbills printed; he claimed that Gillan was both affiliated with the Working Men's Association in



London and 'was very active in the former unions'.<sup>96</sup> The agitation was, therefore, resurrected by the broader 1834 membership, and not just the repatriated Labourers and Hartwell.

It is also clear from A'court and Frampton's letters that this activity was taking place between Shaftsbury, Blandford and Wimbourne, the chief area of Swing and Reform disturbances in 1830-31 and the area of expansion of the FSAL in 1833-34. It was extensive in geographical extent and membership, with A'court reporting that 'in ten of the parishes of the Blandford Union, in some 3 or 4 of the Wimborne Union & 2 or 3 in the Wareham Union, the labourers more or less have been induced to join it.'<sup>97</sup> The centring of the agitation on Blandford indicates that the particularly strict implementation of the new Poor Law in the Blandford Union was a factor in the union's popularity, making it part of the anti-Poor Law protests gripping the nation.<sup>98</sup> This was ignored by A'court, whose correspondence deflected attention away from the new Poor Law, writing to the Poor Law Commission that he was pleased that the union was forcing farmers to rethink the 'scandalously low wages'.<sup>99</sup>

It is evident that wages remained at the same low level they had been during the wage repression of 1831-32. Hartwell reported that the wages of the county 'averaged 7s. per week', with workers under the age of 21 being paid between 3s. 6d. and 4s. 6d. a week.<sup>100</sup> A'court's correspondence confirmed this, revealing that although Portman had raised the wage for his direct employees by 1s his tenants refused to follow his example, with most farmers around Spettisbury still paying 7s. On the 8<sup>th</sup> August he reported that the landowners and magistrates were planning a meeting to propose a 9s wage, but two days later he reported that outside of Blandford and Spettisbury there had been no increases.<sup>101</sup> The authorities were granted some relief when the meeting of the 24<sup>th</sup> was called off, with Portman telling Frampton that this was because there was not enough money to properly pay the strike fund, and that the activists had resolved to return in autumn and winter.<sup>102</sup> Frampton now firmly supported the plans to grant wage concessions, believing that it was the time to put pressure on the farmers to increase wages and undermine the union.<sup>103</sup>

In an undated letter he also expressed disappointment that the agent of Joseph Weld's estate was refusing to raise wages.<sup>104</sup>

Although forming trade unions had been made legal under the Combination Acts of 1824, in 1834 the Dorchester Labourers had been prosecuted under the 1799 Unlawful Societies Act, a pointedly political use of an instrument of the wartime anti-Jacobin 'Pittite Terror'.<sup>105</sup> Evidently, this was not the fatal blow to the FSAL as it has been taken to be, particularly since in 1838 Dorset's unionists successfully worked within the law, as Frampton complained to Lord Russell in August.<sup>106</sup> This caused him to become desperate. When discussing a false rumour of a strike in Spettisbury with Ilchester Frampton wrote he hoped that they had violently turned strike breakers away, as this would give him reason to act against them.<sup>107</sup> However he was reluctant to use the Yeomanry to police the anticipated meeting on August 24<sup>th</sup> as 'they might only serve to irritate'.<sup>108</sup> This was likely a consequence of his experience attempting to put down the pro-Reform riots in Sherborne in 1831, which had convinced him that Yeomanry, considered by the rioters to be pro-Tory, often 'excite angry feelings'.<sup>109</sup> By October the most severe measure Frampton could produce was the distribution of threatening handbills.<sup>110</sup> Outfoxed by the new organisation, Frampton's only real choice was wage concessions.

By autumn the unions became explicitly Chartist. A'acourt reported in early October that the agitation was to resume with a meeting in Bere heath where not only wages but also the Chartist program was to be discussed, a fact he welcomed since it made him feel less anxious 'than if real grievances only have to be brought forward.'<sup>111</sup> However, the agitation was clearly still popular. At the end of October Frampton reported that the 'unions are increasing very rapidly & openly in my neighbourhood', with activists moving from village to village 'without much attempt at concealment', and on October 23<sup>rd</sup> '20 to 30' labourers joined in Owermoigne in south Dorset, further indicating that in geographic and membership terms the union was larger than in 1834.<sup>112</sup> In November Hartwell reported back on 'his visit to Dorchester' to the London Association,

writing that he had attended seven public meetings and fifteen private ones, that several Working Men's Associations had been formed along with some women's, and that 'the working classes were nearly unanimous in their favour.'<sup>113</sup> With some alarm Frampton reported this to Russell at the end of November.<sup>114</sup>

On November 13<sup>th</sup>, Henry Vincent, a prominent London Chartist leader who had recently moved to Bath to organize the west, was sent to Dorset. He stayed in Tolpuddle at the Stanfield family's house, from the window of which he gave a speech during a large meeting on November 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>115</sup> The Dorchester Labourers were again part of this agitation. Either John or Thomas Stanfield was present with Vincent, and on November 17<sup>th</sup> A'court sent to the Poor Law commission a copy of a handbill written by George Loveless, which 'proves beyond a doubt [his] active agency in the formation of the Labourer's Unions throughout this county.'<sup>116</sup> These were likely the same texts as the placards signed by Loveless that Frampton reported were being displayed around Blandford.<sup>117</sup> The handbill encouraged labourers to 'obtain by peaceable means, a fair return of wages for your labour, and a share in the making of the laws by having a vote for Members of Parliament'. He attacked the handbills Frampton had been distributing by telling labourers to 'laugh at their threats' since the unions were completely legal, and concluded:

...if you [want] to obtain a fair day's wages for a fair day's work, to compel your [masters to treat] the honest and industrious labourers with respect and to be enabled to [spend the last] few years of your life under your own roof, in the bosom of your [families] stand by each other, and remain firm to your Unions.<sup>118</sup>

This combination of wage demands, universal suffrage and attacks on the Poor Law made the agitation in Dorset little different from movements elsewhere in the nation. In the north, anti-Poor Law and trade union agitation had easily transitioned into Chartism.<sup>119</sup> Discussing the events in Dorset Malcolm Chase notes that 'Chartism was developing a capacity to adopt and adapt local political issues'.<sup>120</sup> While the Chartist agitation in Dorset was 'exceptional' for directly

targeting agricultural labourers, it is worth underlining that it was not exceptional in the county itself.<sup>121</sup> The Chartist trade unionism of 1838 was part of almost a decade of labour disputes and the politicisation of the lower classes that had begun with Swing. The agitation of that year therefore represented the integration of Chartism into long-term local disputes by the labourers of Dorset themselves.

In mid-November a meeting of several thousand labourers was finally held on Charlton Down outside Blandford.<sup>122</sup> Vincent reported that this caused panic with ‘the large farmers expected to be murdered in their beds before the morning’ and every labourer ‘20 miles round Blandford’ threatened with being discharged if they attended the meeting.<sup>123</sup> The speakers, Hartwell, Vincent and two of Vincent’s friends from Bath, attacked Dorset’s destitution, low wages, and the new Poor Law. At one point Thomas Stanfield stood on the waggon to receive applause while Vincent said that if the labourers ‘made the law he never would have been transported.’<sup>124</sup> Vincent spoke in Blandford that night and again at the weekend, alarming Frampton and A’acourt.<sup>125</sup> It was at this point that some farmers began sacking their workmen who had attended the meetings, and others for being part of the Working Men’s Associations.<sup>126</sup> In A’Acourt’s account those discharged for joining the Associations were offered re-employment at higher wages, provided they left the Association, although Hartwell alleged that the wages were actually 7s.<sup>127</sup> Those who refused applied for relief on the grounds of destitution, but were denied since the rules of the Associations said that 7s a week would be paid to anyone discharged by their master.<sup>128</sup> When Hartwell contacted the Blandford Board of Guardians, arguing (perhaps lying) that this rule had been struck out, they again rejected the claimants on the ground that their potato patches had produced enough food to sell off for sustenance.<sup>129</sup> Hartwell publicly denied this in the Radical press, claiming that few labourers he had met had any land for such purposes.<sup>130</sup> Desperately, he challenged the legal basis of the Board’s actions and proposed a levy of the London Association to financially assist the Dorset Associations.<sup>131</sup>

Despite his efforts, this combination of factors drove members from the unions and meant that, by the time of the General Convention the following spring, the Blandford Working Men's Association reported that the repression had made it difficult to organize outside of the town.<sup>132</sup>

The presence of farmers on the new Boards of Guardians, and particularly the encouragement to deny relief enshrined in new Poor Law, granted landlords and farmers extensive powers over their labourers. The threat of the workhouse and no obligation to provide out-relief allowed them to force the low wage rates. The repression of 1838 indicates the dissolution of the anti-Jacobin mindset, as even Frampton lost his faith in harsh measures and turned towards more surgical manipulation of wages and relief. It should be noted, however, that how the Laws were implemented was a matter of dispute in eastern Dorset. The Wareham Board, dominated by Frampton and his son, were regularly attacked by A'court and the Poor Law Commission for their continued provision of outdoor relief and their frequent concessions to those in workhouses.<sup>133</sup> After a final dispute in a long running conflict with the Poor Law Commission in July 1839, when the Commission forbade the Board to grant outdoor relief to a number of able-bodied labourers with large families to supplement their income, Frampton led a mass-resignation of most of the Board.<sup>134</sup> Ultimately they won out, and by the 1840s James and his son had returned to the Board, which then continued to be more lenient and paternalistic. Like many of the rural Poor Law Unions Wareham's became administered as its most dominant members saw fit, in this case aligned with some of the principles and practices of the moral economy.<sup>135</sup> The Poor Law was not a clear-cut watershed between rural relations in a traditional, 'customary' society and an industrial class-based one.<sup>136</sup> However, the use of relief as a means of disciplining labourers and forcing wages was as much a tool of Tory paternalists in Wareham as it was the Chadwickians in Blandford, and the Wareham Board resolved in 1843 that any labourer out of employ due to a dispute with their master was to be denied any relief other than the workhouse.<sup>137</sup> Despite their evident differences, in both the Blandford and Wareham Poor Law Unions the new Poor Laws were a fundamental tool in the restoration of landowner control.

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In Dorset Swing quickly led to major wage concessions that became a focal point for succeeding labour disputes. A major element in this was the local elite's decision to firstly press for a unified policy of wage increases, before promptly abandoning that policy. Once rescinded the universal nature of those concessions turned the Swing disputes into a singular one that transcended parochial barriers. The capable leadership of those like George Loveless ensured that these disputes cohered into a movement of organized labour which operated not only beyond parish boundaries, but within a national and political mind-set. This in turn was revived in 1838 with the same demands, in a union that went further by laying the basis for Chartism amongst the agricultural labourers. This concurs with Griffin's conclusion that 'in a sense, Swing did not die'. However, his notion that in the south-east it was not through rural trade unionism that Swing contributed to popular protests later in the 1830s does not apply to Dorset.<sup>138</sup> The precise and detailed links that can be made in Dorset between the Swing protests, the wage concessions and their repression, the FSAL and then Chartism conclusively proves that it does. Chartism in Dorset should therefore not just be read as the failure of attempts to incorporate agricultural labourers into the movement, but also the culmination of Swing.

While perceiving disputes in class terms helped the FSAL overcome the limitations of customary forms of negotiation and protest, its origins within the customs of the moral economy suggest that the FSAL was perceived as an organic development of traditional forms of labour and village relations. That said, it sought to supplant customary forms of protest, and contemporaries repeatedly noted the fact that the unions were not accompanied by clandestine or illegal acts of protest. A'court highlighted that there were no 'outrages, breach of the peace or incendiary fires' during the Chartist agitation, which correlates with Frampton's own frustrations throughout 1838 that no laws had been broken.<sup>139</sup> However, in *Captain Swing* Hobsbawm and Rudé wrote that:

It is tempting to think that the persistent fires in Piddletrenthide [between 1828 and 1843] have some relation to the events which brought six respectable labourers of that region into history as the Tolpuddle martyrs, but the temptation must be resisted. All we know about this part of East Dorset, disturbed in 1830, is that a scattering of fires occurs in it throughout the 1830s and early 1840s...<sup>140</sup>

Rather than overstating the distinction between fragmented and localised forms of protest actions and homogenous class-based movements, it would be fruitful instead to succumb to this temptation. It seems likely that some of these fires were protests directly related to the labour and political disputes outlined in this article. The implications of this, and the way in which the FSAL was born of the parochial relations of the moral economy, indicates that historians should be wary of drawing a distinction between localised forms of protest and organised mass-movements of labour. It is here that the lessons of this case study apply to a far longer period and a far broader historiography, as it would be fruitful to investigate in other contexts the points of contact between more fragmented forms of dissent and attempts at organized and homogenised movements. Although we live in an age when ‘power of the trade unions and indeed the term ‘working class’ both seem somewhat anachronistic’, for those like George Loveless class was an idea and a model for action which energised and disrupted society with its novelty.<sup>141</sup> Equally, the rapid decline of the union and the reassertion of landlord paternalism in the 1840s pose the question of what happens after organized movements suffer disarming defeats. These questions are certainly relevant for today, as the situation is inverted: ‘traditional’ class-based mass-movements appear to sit uneasily alongside ostensibly newer, more spontaneous, less-organized and centralised ones. How activists can develop relations between these two forms certainly seems fruitful, and perhaps a rejection of concepts of ‘old’ and ‘new’ is a starting point for this. The case of the Dorchester Labourers certainly suggests that we should be careful not to draw too artificial a distinction between homogenous movements and more disparate forms of conflict and negotiation.

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