

Free Trade and Agricultural Distress

On Wednesday a public meeting took place at Highworth, “for the purpose of taking into consideration the distress of the working classes and to discuss the benefits likely to arise if the trade in corn and other provisions were free”. The Earl of **Radnor**, whose seat is about two miles from the town was ‘requested” to take the chair and Mr **Falvey**, one of the lecturers of the Anti-Corn Law League arrived a short time prior to the commencement of the meeting to assist in the proceedings. The place appointed for the meeting was a field near the town called Bear Barn close and three wagons placed side by side formed the platform for the speakers with no shelter overhead though the weather was wet.

At 2 o'clock about 700 persons had collected in the field; some of them small farmers, chiefly tenants of Lord **Radnor** and the rest consisting of the townspeople and a considerable number of agricultural labourers. The market day had been selected for holding the meeting. At a few minutes after 2 the Earl of **Radnor** accompanied by Mr **Edridge**, Mr **J Crowdy**, Mr **Falvey** and one or two other gentlemen, ascended the platform and the noble Earl took the chair.

The Earl of **Radnor**, in opening the business of the day, observed that he understood this was a meeting called at the request of some of his neighbours for the purpose of inquiring into the causes of the distress of the working classes and whether they might not be removed by a repeal of the corn laws, which would add to the demand for labour by increasing the demand for our manufactures. He was very happy to preside over such a meeting and he looked upon his having been called upon to do so as an evidence of the disposition of his neighbours towards him, occasioned by his own behaviour to them. He was there to hear the sentiments that would be uttered by others, but if in the course of the proceedings of the day he should be called onto give his opinion or advice, he should be ready to do so. He hoped that all persons who might wish to address the meeting would be heard with attention and replied to with candour.

Mr **Croome** (a small tradesman in Highworth) came forward to propose the resolutions which were amalgamated. He said he depended for his business upon working men. He sold second-hand clothes and bedding which brought him very much in contact with the working classes. They used formerly to come to him to buy clothes and other things, but now he was sorry to say that they came to sell again what they had bought the year before, in order that they might buy themselves victuals. The poor were told by the gentlemen in their neighbourhood to go to the Poor Law Union. That was more easily said than done. It required a deal of fortitude in the poor man to break up his little home, to leave the cottage where he had reared his children, to give up his little patch of ground tilled by his own hand and perhaps the little tree planted to commemorate the birth of a favourite child. (*Hear Hear*) Suppose, however, he got over all these feelings and when winter set in went to the Union. As the season advanced he would come home again – no; he would come back to the cottage which he had formerly called his home and he would find it in the possession of another. (*Hear Hear*) Then indeed would the tear come into his eye. (*Hear*) He (Mr **Croome**) would, with the consent of the chairman, read a statement that had been made of his condition by a poor man in that neighbourhood.

It ran this:- "I, a labouring man, in the town of Highworth, do humbly pray that something may be done to lighten the difficulties and distress under which I labour through the badness of the times. I have a wife and four children to maintain out of 8s a week. My children are so small that my oldest is under nine; so all depend on my 8s a week which I find is not enough to maintain us in a proper manner, as I have to pay 1s 9d for house rent, 9d for firing and 6s for six gallons of bread at 1s a gallon which alone amounts to 8s 6d and leaves me, therefore in debt 6d. I have nothing left to buy tea, sugar, candles, meat and other things too numerous to mention. As it is, I have to work in the harvest from daylight to dusk like a slave to pay what I get behind at the shop and I can't do it then, instead of my having something left to spend with the tailor and the draper to clothe my wife and children. Something must be done. What will be the end of it, I know not. I can't stop longer to see my wife and children nearly half-naked and half-starved." This was the condition of this poor labouring man. (*Hear*) Unfortunately, there were too many in the same state. (*Hear* and a cry of "*It's true*") It was impossible for a man with a family to live as free-born Briton should upon 8s a week. (*They can't do it*) He (Mr **Croome**) did think that the labourers of this country were not treated as they ought to be. (*Hear*) What was to be done? He would leave it to others to say what should be done; but it appeared to him that we wanted a greater outlet for our industry. The population increased at the rate of a thousand a day. Was that a time to shackle industry? All that the poor wanted was work. Give them work and they were always well inclined to labour. (*Cheers* from the labourers in the meeting) What they asked for was a fair day's wages for a fair day's work. (*Cheers*) Mr **Croome** then proposed the following resolutions:-

1. That there prevails at this time amongst agricultural labourers and small tradesmen in this neighbourhood great distress arising from want of employment and the inadequate wages which they can obtain when employed.
2. That it appears that the population rapidly increases but that the means of employment do not increase in an equal proportion.
3. That it is the first and most important duty of all governments to provide as fully as they can for the adequate supply of the food of the people; and if no human care or foresight can entirely obviate the uncertainty of the seasons, to take care at least that no legislative enactments should intercept or diminish the amount or increase the cost of the supply which, but for such enactments might be obtained.
4. That the corn, malt and other provision laws now in force, have the effect both of intercepting and diminishing the amount and at times, greatly increasing the cost, of the supply of food which might otherwise be obtained by the people and that therefore they ought to be repealed.
5. That these same laws, by throwing obstacles in the way of trade and by impeding the natural course of industry in the manufacturing districts, greatly diminish the sources of employment which would otherwise be opened for the increasing population of this kingdom.
6. That the working classes of this country have no desire to rely for support on gifts of charity or benevolence; that as free men they wish to support themselves by their own exertions and labour; that they have no doubt if human laws did not interfere,

they would be able to do so and that they therefore, hope that all laws tending to curtail the supply of food, to diminish the sources of employment and to press down the springs of industry may speedily be abolished.

7. That all laws enacted for the purpose of raising the price of food and other commodities used by the people above their natural price in the great market of the world may be beneficial to certain classes but must be injurious to the great mass of the people.

Mr **Askell** (a tenant farmer) came forward to second the resolutions. What was to become of the labourer? That was the real question of the day. (*Hear Hear*) The first duty of the Legislature was to see that the people do not starve. How was it possible for a labourer to live with a family on 6s or 7s a week? (*Hear Hear*) He advised the labourers to be as patient as they could – to hold together as well as they could for their common interest. They need not terrify any one or attempt any violent measures; but they could form associations. (*Hear Hear*) Many, no doubt, would have to go into the poor-house but the rest could form associations which they had as much right to do as the Carlton Club. They could form village clubs, reading societies, ay and teetotal societies and then they would not get drunk and break the law. (*A Laugh*) The wants of the labourer were the cause of his committing crime. (*Hear*) After some further remarks, Mr **Askell** seconded the resolutions.

William Spackman (a labouring man in the neighbourhood of Highworth) requested to be allowed to address the meeting. He said he had a wife and nine children to support and he had not done more than three day's work during the last fortnight. This brought him in 5s 6d or 6s out of which he had to pay 2s a week for rent. What could he do with the rest? (*Hear*) Well, but he was told he might go to the workhouse and there he meant to go and he hoped that all labouring men with families would go there also. But there they would be separated from their wives and children. (*Hear*) That was against God's law. (*Yes it is!*) The Scripture said "Whom god hath joined, let no man put asunder." The Scripture also said that cursed would be the man who put them asunder and he believed it would be so. (*Cheers*) The Poor Law was a law against Scripture. (*Renewed Cheers*) But it would cost so much to keep them in the workhouse. To keep him and his family in the workhouse would cost 30s a week. Out of the workhouse, with labour and the wages paid for it, it would not cost half as much. (*Hear*) He was willing to work but could get not employment. Even if he did, how could a poor man keep a family on 8s a week? (*Hear Hear*) Something must be done. The poor could not go on any longer. If the poor man wanted 20 lug (perches) of land, why could he not have it at the same price as the farmer? (*A Voice – "Yes and 8£ an acre"*) How could the poor man pay that price? Why, if they let the poor man have a couple of acres of land for a year or two for nothing and then charged him a fair rent for it afterwards, would not that be better than his going to the union? (*Cheers*) But it was of no use. They must all go to the workhouse. His advice was, to the poor who had families, "Flock to the union – fill the union – and then something would be done." (*Hear*) A gentleman came to him the other day and said to him, "Can't you maintain yourself on 8s a week?" He answered the gentleman, "Could you keep yourself on 8s a week?" The gentleman replied that that had nothing to do with it, upon which he answered that it had a great deal to do with it; for if one man could not do it, another could not. (*Cheers*) It was this poverty that drove men to do what they ought not. Many a poor man, with a wife and family, rather than go into the union, where he would be separated from them, did what he would not have done. (*Hear*)

He (**William Spackman**) had been nine months in a workhouse. He did not mean to go nine months more there. He would rather travel the country first. He did not care who was there to hear him, or who was not. The Scripture said, "Thy gold and silver shall bear witness against thee and the cry of the poor shall reach the Lord." The state of the poor was something like the state of the children of Israel when they were in bondage. He said to his fellow-labourers, "Let your prayers ascend to Heaven! May God send us down help and deliver us from our distress." (*Cheers and cries of "Bravo"*)

Mr **Edridge** who lately contested the county was the next speaker. He said he felt some hesitation in addressing them as he was a stranger. He was a plain man speaking to a great many plain men. He should treat the question as a matter of business. The agricultural labourers and small tradesmen were in distress. Why were they in distress? Was it because they were lazy and indulged in drunken habits that they were in want of the common necessaries of life? Or was it because they were starved by the unjust laws of unjust men? (*Yes!*) Was it in consequence of the taxation on corn, on leather, on sugar and on all other things? Yes, it was and they were taxed in an unjust degree. The poor man with his limited means was taxed in a greater degree than the rich man. The taxes bore the most heavily on those articles which the poor man consumed; ye the gentleman could not eat more bread than the poor man. (*Hear*) The taxes ought to bear most on the rich and least on the poor. (*Cheers*) Clever men had calculated that the labourer paid nearly half his wages in taxes on articles of consumption. The gentleman did not pay in anything like the same proportion. This was one great cause of the hardships under which the poor suffered. (*A Voice – "That is the only cause!"*) No, it was not the only cause because by the laws restricting commerce and therefore lessening the demand for labour, the poor were deprived of the means by which they might be able to pay the taxes. (*Hear*) This was foul play and he (Mr **Edridge**) would be ashamed if he did not denounce it whenever the opportunity offered. One of the previous speakers had recommended the labourers to form associations. He thought that was bad advice. Let them appeal to the gentry of England to lead them and let the gentry and the poor be once more of one family. (*Cheers*) The flock would fare badly without the shepherds but in this case the shepherds were all rogues. (*A laugh*) Their noble chairman ought not to have been left alone by the aristocracy today. If he (Mr **Edridge**) was charged with having done wrong, as they were charged with doing so, would he skulk in the woods? No! But they were charged with cruelty and oppression towards the poor. If he were the subject of such a charge, the first 10 or 12 men he met should be his jury. (*Hear*) The gentry ought to come forward and see to the poor. If their horse or their foxhound were ill, the doctor would be sent for and the fine generous animal would be cared for and physicked. But if men – men made in the image of god, with wives and children whose cheeks met together from starvation – came to them, they would not give them a bit of bread! (*Loud Cheers*) They knew that the people were starving (*Hear*), yet they would attend to their horse or their dog, but they would do nothing for the honest industrious working man. (*Hear Hear*) The men who allowed the wives and children of the poor to starve were murderers. "The blood of thy brother be on thy head!" It would be visited on them. (*Cheers*) He (Mr **Edridge**) threw this out by way of hint. It was not often they got such hints. (*Cheers*) There was nothing of a rebellious or a sour spirit among those who had met there that day. All the poor men wanted was to be able to work for themselves and their wives and children. (*"Yes, that is all we want, gentlemen"*) He hoped the gentlemen of England would come forward while it was yet time. (*Cheers*)

William Cole of Lechlade, a labourer, next mounted the wagon from the body of the meeting. He said – We poor men are put upon very much indeed. The farmers make poor souls work many hours more than they ought and give them nothing for it. They put taxes on poor souls, instead of which they ought to take them off. If they took a little of the duty off malt, it would be good for poor souls. Also, if they took a good deal away from the parsons. *(A Laugh)* It would be a good thing for the poor man to get his acre or two acres of land. *(Hear)* The farmer says he would not work if he got it. That is not true. What the working man wants is a little more wages and then he would be able to pay his rent and taxes. *(Hear)* The Lord will be with the poor and god knows what will become of the gentlemen when they die. I'm sure I don't know. *(Hear)* I hope the gentlemen will let the poor have a little land. *(A Voice – "Yes, but not at 6£ an acre!")* Let them have land for one year for nothing and then let it to them afterwards for a penny a lug (perch) more than the others have it for. *(Hear)* The speaker was going on to recommend that the tax should be taken off tea and sugar and put on thrashing machines, when it was intimated to him that he was talking too long. He persisted until **Spackman**, the former speaker stepped forward and gave him a significant look, upon which turning round to Lord **Radnor** and the gentlemen who had got up the meeting, he said "Gentlemen, I have said all I can to do good. I hope it will be pleasing to you".

A person named **Candy**, who was dressed like a mechanic and wore an apron and who said he came from London, then addressed the meeting in a long and rather violent harangue, savouring of Chartism. After entering at some length into the condition of the working classes, he asked, "What are you going to do? Are you going to submit, or are you going to join heart and hand in putting down the demon power – monopoly? Unite – unite – unite! Get information. That is the groundwork of regeneration. All nature around you is good and beautiful, testifying to the handiwork of God, yet man, His noblest work, presents this spectacle of woe. Yew, there are men who have reason to curse the hour that gave them birth. *(Hear Hear)* Then let us use our energies to put an end to such a state of things. Let every man do all the good he can. Ultimately, a great and glorious end will be accomplished. God forbid that we should see here the days of Danton, Robespierre and Marat. The English people want no revolution. All that they want is a fair day's wages for a fair day's work." *(Hear)*

The Earl of **Radnor** said he wished to say a few words before the resolutions were put. Some of the speakers had described the state in which the labouring classes were. He feared that in that neighbourhood the poverty which had been stated to exist was not at all uncommon. The agricultural labourer suffered considerable privation.. Not only was there a deficiency in the demand for labour, but the wages given also were most inadequate to supply the wants of the people. At the same time it appeared to him most unjust to bring a charge against the landowner and the farmer for giving insufficient wages. No man was bound to give for anything more than he could get it for. They had heard a great deal about the New Poor Law. *(Hear)* Now he had always been and still was a zealous friend to the Poor Law. He thought it was a wise measure. They all knew what abuses there were under the old Poor Law. The present law was based on the most strict philosophical principles and the more stringently it was carried out, the better he believed it would be for all persons to whom it was intended to apply.

At the same time he was free to admit that the poor of this country were labouring under great difficulties and grievances, for which some remedy might and ought to be found. He believed that the poverty of the working man arose from the labour marked being overstocked which was owing to the demand for the industry of the country being restricted by the laws affecting trade, commerce and manufactures. He believed that what the country wanted was free trade. (*Hear Hear*) But a great deal had been said about the allotment system and it was said that the labourers paid too high rents for their allotments. He thought the argument was unjust. Why should land be let to one man for less when another was ready to give more? It would be to deprive the landowner of his right to his property. The real cause of the high rents was that there was a great demand for allotments and people were ready to give more for them than perhaps they ought to do. He for one was altogether opposed to the principle of the allotment system. That principle prevailed almost universally in Ireland. (*Hear*) The noble Earl concluded by advocating a repeal of the Corn Laws, which, by opening a larger market, would increase the demand for labour and therefore the wages of labour.

Mr **Phipps** said he was in favour of allotments and thought it was of no use talking about free trade. It was of no use to send the labourers to Manchester. They bred too fast there already. He was for allotments, but they should not be at rents too high for the people to pay. They should not be treated as the noble Earl in the chair treated some tenants of his, when he enclosed a strip of waste land at the bottom of Blunsdon hill and let it in allotments at 8d the lug (equal to 5 6s 8d an acre) and when the tenants had worked the land and improved it, turned them out to make room for others; putting them on fresh allotments for them to cultivate at the same high rents. (*Loud cries of "Hear Hear"*) The speaker entered into some details which seemed to be understood and taken up by the working men in the body of the meeting; but his statement was so rambling and unconnected, that it was not possible to understand it clearly. At length he was called to order by the Earl of **Radnor**, who said he would tell them exactly how the matter stood as to the allotments at Blunsdon hill. The fact was that although many years ago he was bitten by the allotment system, he was now wholly opposed to it. One reason was that instead of it making the poor man independent, as it professed to do, it really made him dependent, for it required superintendence and management, all which took away from the poor man's independence. As to his own allotments, the case was this – there was a large strip of land by the side of the turnpike road, which was taken in for him by Captain **Bradstock**, the surveyor of the roads. Captain **Bradstock**, let it out in allotments and chiefly to workmen employed roads. (*A Voice – "Yes, but who receives the rents?"*) If they would let him finish, he would tell them. (*Laughter*) A gentleman in the neighbourhood disputed his right to the land and the rents (as we understood) were therefore for a time not paid to him. But as soon as the question was settled, which was the next year, he reduced the rents 25 per cent and notice was given that there would be further reductions if the tenant managed the land well. The noble Earl then repeated his previous objections to the allotment system. It was either merely a means of eking out the wages of labourers, or it afforded a temptation to greedy landlords (*Hear Hear*) to drive hard bargains and get more than the real value of the land. That was the case in Ireland. (*A Voice – "Let us have the land at the same rate as the monopolizing farmers."*)

The Earl of **Radnor** – Who is to fix the price? If a man is willing to give me 8d a lug, of course I shall take it. (*A labourer* – “Yes, but you won’t benefit the poor, my Lord”) If I could get 8d a lug and I let it to you for 5d of course I should be making you a present of the difference. (*A Voice* – “The poor don’t want the land cheaper than anybody else.”)

Mr **Phipps** – Lord **Radnor** was born a nobleman and bred a nobleman, how can he now what the feelings of the poor are? (*Hear Hear*) What the noble chairman said might be all very well, but how could the poor man help giving the high rent? He could not move his family to another parish as he might pigs to another market. (*Cheers*)

Mr **Lawrence** (a shoemaker who was saluted as the ‘village lawyer’) here came forward and declared he had been a tenant of Lord **Radnor** at 8d a lug. He was also bound to clear the ditch. If a man kept his allotment drained and paid his rent, ought he to be turned out because another man was ready to give more rent, after the place had been worked upon? (*Cheers*) No, let them keep the land they had dug. (*Loud Cheers*) If the noble Lord let his land at 2£ an acre, which would be 1£ more than it was worth and gave the second 1£ as a premium to labour, then he (Mr **Lawrence**) would be glad to meet him and hail him as a friend to the poor. (*Hear Hear*) Lord **Radnor** told them, that if one man would not give the price, another would. He held that to be an abominable doctrine to be broached in a Christian country. (*Cheers*) Was this the way to mend the condition of the poor man? Let him have the land at a fair rent. (*Cheers*) If the noble lord let allotments, he should give them at a rent the poor man could pay and not at such extortionate and extravagant rents as were paid to the noble chairman.

Candy, the man who had spoken before, again addressed the meeting. Since 1688 there had been no less than 3,900 enclosure acts to swell the parks, lawns and shrubberies of the landlords. (*A Voice* – “Yes, that’s a home truth.”) And then, when the poor came and asked for a scheme of home colonization, which would reduce the amount of misery and thin the gaols and Poor-Law unions, they were told by Lord **Radnor** that he would not agree to it because it made the poor dependent. They had a right as Englishmen to ask for it. England was the land of their fathers and they ought to be able to enjoy it, by paying the full value for it. (*Cheers*) The Earl of **Radnor** then put the resolutions, but there were not more than one or two hands help up. One labourer in the crowd cried out that they wanted allotments at 1£ an acre and not free trade. The feeling of the meeting was so evidently in favour of allotments and against the chairman, that it seemed probable that the resolutions would not be carried.

Mr **Edridge** came forward and made a speech in favour of the allotment system which put the people into better humour. Mr **Croome** then took the resolutions from Lord **Radnor** and spoke for a short time in favour of the allotment system, but saying that it had no immediate connexion with the object of the meeting. The Earl of **Radnor** then again put the resolutions, which after a little hesitation were carried by a few hands (some 20 or 30 in favour, to two or three against) but while they were being put, one or two labourers called out to Lord **Radnor** to give them allotments at a fair rent.

Thanks were then formally voted to the chair and the meeting separated.

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