

**A DISTANT PROSPECT, BEING A BRIEF LOOK AT INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS  
IN THE STROUDWATER AREA 200 YEARS AGO.**

**Christopher Cox**



**Stroudwater**

**Foreword**

"The steep acclivities and continued unevenness of ground render travelling through this district rather troublesome, but the great diversity of picturesque landscape which on every turn is presented to view, and the various dyes of the cloth as it is stretched on the tenters, particularly in the bottoms, afford a succession of objects pleasing to the eye, and more especially grateful to the contemplating mind of the politician, who beholds with exulting pride the increasing riches of his countrymen, the effects of unrivalled ingenuity and industrious

perseverance."

Thomas Rudge, "History of Gloucestershire." 1803.

"The increasing wealth of the nation has had little or no tendency to better the condition of the labouring poor."

Tom Paine, "Rights of Man." 1791.

## Introduction

A judicious selection of quotations by, and about, local people may be used not only for the intrinsic interest in our predecessors in the county, but also to illuminate many problems - and proposed solutions - common to the rest of the nations in that century which we call the early Industrial Revolution. It is too facile to proclaim a return to "Victorian values" as the panacea for our problems, and in fact the great radical reforms in labour legislation, local administration, political behaviour and social attitudes largely stem from the 50 years before Victoria came to the throne.

The roots of the truth are older, and more complex. Karl Marx said: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."(1) Two philosophers were perhaps the most important, at least in this country, in "changing" the world: Adam Smith and the Rev. T.R. Malthus. Adam Smith presented an economic analysis of the Market still worth studying today - and in fact, largely being followed not only by certain European governments but also by others previously thought as socialistic. But Smith was not an unthinking supporter of capitalism. He wrote that "masters are always and everywhere in a sort of tacit... combination not to raise the wages of labour above their actual rate", while masters "never cease to call aloud for the assistance of the civil magistrate, and the rigorous execution of those laws which have been enacted with so much severity against the combinations of servants, labourers, and journeymen". He said:

No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides that they who food, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged.(2)

[The labour theory of value?]

Adam Smith, being a Scot, wrote logically, clearly and without emotional interruptions or moral judgements. Malthus, English, did tend to insert moralistic judgements appropriate to his calling and his time, but he too only tried to point out what actually happened, rather than what was hoped for. Like Smith (and also like many others then and since), he wrote that

the only commodity a poor man has is his labour. Two great

causes of the degradation of man (are) misery, and too great riches. (3)

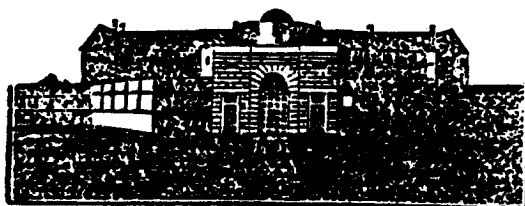
Others (as usual) applied what they took to be his lessons in a somewhat different spirit than that in which they were offered, and both Malthus and Smith have been blamed for the oft-repeated evils of the early poor laws. Like Tom Paine, Malthus asserted that Poor Laws created the poor they maintained, and suggested that "a society based on Benevolence leads to degradation - self-love is the main spring." Benevolence in this case means doling out charity, thereby enabling those who pay wages to keep them as low as possible, as in the notorious Speenhamland System of subsidising low wages out of parish rates.

Let us therefore now examine some local writings in view of the simplified remarks above.

The great industrial and social legislation of the Tudor period, in particular the Act of 1563, had attempted to regulate industry, as for example in limiting the number of journeymen employed by any one master, and especially by giving local magistrates the statutory duty of insisting on a minimum wage when food prices were high.(4)

Our example is taken from the year 1757 - shortly after the outbreak of the Seven Years War.

Disruption to trade through the outbreak of this war, and the hardship and destitution brought to the Gloucestershire clothing districts, with the risk of serious civil disturbances, had brought Major James Wolfe down with his soldiers firstly to Dursley, and then to the area of Chalford and Stroud. While it was his duty to maintain order (there were no police forces as such then), he was sympathetic to the workers. And also, it maybe noticed, were some of the local J.Ps.



The County Gaol

A special sessions was held in Minchinhampton to see if the magistrates ought to enforce a minimum wage. An anonymous writer, thought to be James Dalloway, produced a pamphlet in defence of the master clothiers.

Nathaniel Peach and Joseph Wathen, clothiers of distinction, said they had been instructed to pay higher wages, but

already were paying higher than many others. Joseph Teacle (not even personally involved) loudly exclaimed "as for Mr Peach, he will swear anything." Here was a specimen of that rancorous and incorrigible kind of spirit, which rages in the hearts of our late rioters. Should such dispositions in the common people be encouraged by laws that render them independent? And have not the clothiers cause to complain of such insults, to which they are daily exposed? (5)

In the event, the J.Ps. decided a minimum wage should be enforced, but as the Dean of Gloucester pointed out in his pamphlet - Instructions to Travellers - the outcome was economically inevitable.

The weavers... returned to their work... the most sensible of them, finding all their resources must fail till the next Michaelmas quarter-sessions, complied with their masters' wages upon the old footing: others more refractory still kept off, and even when they did work, were frequently disrupting about their wages, and lodging complaints and informations; thereby occasioning great trouble, and continual hindrance and obstruction to the clothiers in their trade, which is too much encouraged and promoted by some of the neighbouring justices of the peace, who appear not to be convinced of the inexperience and impropriety of putting such laws into execution. (6)

[Striking dockers of 1989, please note!]

The clothing trade was always subject to the "annual vibrations" (which we would call seasonal variations); the effects of the long French wars at the turn of the century greatly increased the swings up and down of the trade, and the introduction of labour-saving machinery made matters permanently worse. Dean Tucker had described industrial relations a good half-century before spinning jennies became common in the Stroud area, when he contrasted the cloth manufacture in the West of England with that of Yorkshire (and it should be noted that what he said gives a very different view from that of the later industrial writers - so much for the spurious North-South divide! Now read on.) (7)

in Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, and Somersetshire, the Manufacture is carried on by a quite different Process, and the Effects are accordingly: viz, one Person with a great Stock and large Credit buys the Wool, pays for the spinning, Weaving, Milling, Dying, Shearing, Dressing, etc. etc. That is, he is the Master of the whole Manufacture from first to last, and perhaps employs a thousand Persons under him. This is the Clothier, whom all the Rest are to look upon as their Paymaster. But will they not also sometimes look upon him as their Tyrant? The Master, for example, however well-disposed in himself, is naturally tempted by his Situation to be proud and overbearing, to consider his People as the Scum of the Earth, whom he has a right to squeeze whenever

he can; because they ought to be kept low, and not rise up in Competition with their Superiors.

(Thus) their self-love takes a wrong Turn, destructive to themselves, and others. They think it no crime to get as much Wages, and to do as little for it as they possibly can, to lie and cheat, and do any other bad Thing; provided it is only against their Master, whom they look upon as their common Enemy, with whom no Faith is to be kept...(8)

[As some might say to-day - the typical British workman?]

We shall return to industrial class-division: but first - the Demon Drink.

Dean Tucker continues:

The Motives to Industry, Frugality and Sobriety are all subverted by this one Consideration, viz: that they shall always be chained to the same Oar and never be Journeymen. Therefore their only Happiness is to get Drunk, and to make Life pass away with as little Thought as possible.

George Turner added his bit in 1794. Ale houses, he said, were too numerous, and chandler's shops were also to blame for the lack of purchasing power

purveying the worst of commodities, and draw that money out of the pockets of the poor for tea, sugar, butter and other unnecessary articles (my emphasis) which, if taken to a proper market, and well laid out, would support themselves and families in health and comfort.(9)

[So much for the village corner shop.]

Poverty, he asserted, should rather be attributed to the vicious and profligate habits of the weavers, who can, if good hands, earn a guinea and a half a week but instead, the weavers spent their wages in the alehouses, leaving their wives and families to be supported by the parish.

A more authoritative observer was Sir Frederick Morton Eden who in the late 1790 remarked that in

families whose finances do not allow them the indulgence of malt liquor, the deleterious produce of China constitutes their most usual beverage. (10)

[So much for PG Tips and the chimpanzees tea-parties!]

William Marshall referred to "the swinish guzzling of labourers in the Vale of Gloucester", and went on to say

Alehouses are an intolerable nuisance to husbandry. They are the nurseries of idleness, and every other vice... yet we see them everywhere planted, as if for the purpose of rendering this nation more vicious than it already is... alehouses, like lotteries, are opened "for the good of the nation." The nation must be in a tottering state, indeed, if

it require gambling and drunkenness, the two main pillars of vice, to support it.(11)

(It is a point to be remarked upon that between the two World Wars, public houses and churches seem to have been closed down in the Stroud area in about equal proportions!)

Forty years earlier, similar sentiments were expressed. Those "sympathetic gentlemen" who thought it their legal duty (it was!) to compel masters to pay a living wage would have done better to reduce the number of licensed houses for selling ale and spirituous liquors, which are the temptations to idleness and intemperance, seminaries of cabal and sedition, and real sources of poverty and distress.(12)

The Georgian gentleman was not notorious for temperance and sobriety when face to face with a bottle of port. William Lawrence, organist of Stroud parish Church in the 1820s, had a caustic line or two about the magistrate deciding (after a long delay) to give a dole to a pauper:

Tell him to stop a little, or go home,  
For I'm engaged, say he, and cannot come;  
I am so pestered with the lower class,  
I've scarcely time to take a cheerful glass...(13)

In the earlier 18th century magistrates did not necessarily side with the clothing masters; but by the end of the French Wars, clothiers had become gentlemen, and J.P.s. too. The Rev. Thomas Rudge underlined this attitude when he wrote in 1806

The greatest evils to agriculture would be to place the labourer in a state of independence, and thus destroy the indispensable gradations of society.(14)

Such an attitude, of course, was not new. Isaac Watts, prolific hymn writer, had this to say in the 1720s:

The Great God has wisely ordained in the Course of his Providence in all Ages, that among Mankind there should be some Rich, and some Poor. (15)

But the hardening of attitudes to disaffection among the labouring poor was much inflated by the disturbing doctrines of the French Revolution. Likewise a spatial distinction was being made in, for example, large towns. In London the rich were now disassociating themselves from the areas of the capital where the poor lived: and we can say this division was becoming more apparent in the minds of men. As Tom Paine wrote, the aristocracy "live apart from the distress, and the expence of relieving it," and he added "the Beer tax presses on the poor, not on the rich".(16) (It was the humorist Beachcomber who once wrote "It is not true to say there is one law for the rich and one for the poor. There is no law for the rich, and hundreds for the poor.")

Tom Paine said that the first step of practical relief would be to abolish the poor rates entirely and in lieu to make a remission of (indirect) taxes to the poor.

In this he agreed, though for somewhat different reasons, with those who sought to get rid of the now intolerable burden of parish rates for the parish poor, which pressed heaviest on those with the fewest resources. Paine continues

When in countries that are called civilised, we see age going to the workhouse and youth to the gallows, something must be wrong in the system of government.

Civil government does not consist in executions; but in making that provision for the instruction of youth, and the support of age, as to exclude, as much as possible, profligacy from the one, and despair from the other.

Paine, the friend of William Blake, was one hundred and fifty years in advance of his time, and had to leave England to avoid arrest as a seditious traitor. Yet his suggested reforms seem to us today eminently reasonable (and many of them have since been put into effect). He is without honour in his own country.

Combinations in restraint of trade, the 18th century equivalent of trade unions' restrictive practices, and formed for the same reasons, though against the current theories of economics, were not necessarily illegal, though new ones after the Nore Mutiny were regarded as subversive and Jacobin-inspired, and such were put outside the law. But, contrary to what the simpler history books tell us, associations of craftsmen not only had long been in existence, but remained active until the laws were changed in the early 19th century.(17)

When the cross-cut shearing machine (patented if not invented by Lewis of Brimscombe, and ancestor of the cylindrical lawnmower) began to threaten the well-paid jobs of the shearmen, they and the weavers combined to have such devices declared illegal (as strictly, under the Tudor industrial laws, they were), hired a lawyer from Cheltenham, and for several years fought a losing battle as far as the House of Lords against their introduction.(18) (The strike of 1824, with large meetings on Rodborough Common, were declared illegal - but that is another story.)

John Partridge, dyer of Bowbridge, made these fatuous remarks, referring to the distress after the French Wars.

...if the weavers quietly and legally resist oppression, those who have the administration of the laws will doubtless protect them from injury and injustice. (19)

1817 was the year of Peterloo. As Thomas Hobbes remarked two centuries before, "Covenants without the Sword are mere Words, and of no Avail".(20)

Treatment of those who for whatever reason took violent or criminal action became, not necessarily more harsh than before, but more ruthless, presumably through fear of Red Revolution,

though Sir George Onesphorus Paul's new County Gaols and their regime were for their day enlightened and humanitarian, endeavouring to reform rather than punish.(21)

This paper is not concerned with penal institutions; but attitudes to the almost intractable problems of unemployment and destitution can be illustrated by a few more quotations.

Colleen Haine's articles, published in earlier Journals, on the mills and mill-owners of the Painswick valley, show how many went out of business in the early 19th century, and how many changed hands, the old families giving up and newer ones, such as the Marlings, taking over.

On 22 July 1822 Painswick Vestry, the local council of those days, ordered that shirts, aprons and blankets were to be provided for the Poor House, and similarly on 2 June 1824 Rodborough Vestry ordered that £7 was to be spent on shoes for the men and boys, and shifts for the women. The occasion for the latter precise sum was a fine on Joseph Partridge (also of Bowbridge) who had been encroaching on the common.(22)

But grimmer measures were taken with those, not yet in the poorhouse, who would not (i.e. could not ) find work. On 10 April 1823, Spoonbed Tithing of Painswick Parish ordered that persons in receipt of poor relief should bear a badge P.P.,(presumably parish pauper), and on 17 August 1826 the Tithing meeting ordered that able bodied paupers seeking relief should be given work under the parish overseer - but if they refused to take what was offered (i.e. stone-breaking for unemployable weavers!), they should not be given any relief. As William Lawrence's J.P. is made to say

I think you might have work if you were willing  
To look about: however, here's a shilling.(23)

[There were no bicycles in those days.]



From a Trade Token

A happier note however is sounded by Rodborough Vestry in 1836, when the new Stroud Union Workhouse was being built up Stroud Hill. The Vestry refused to send the aged and destitute of their Parish to the new Workhouse saying they should NOT be separated from their relatives, and so would be kept on in the Parish poorhouse. And we may note that surgeons were annually appointed to attend to sick paupers in the poorhouse.



Local clothiers, as well as politicians in Westminster, do not seem fully to have comprehended the root causes of pauperism and unemployment (apart from following Adam Smith's analysis but without much sign of human sympathy). But Smith was Scottish and logical, and most M.Ps. were English and muddle-headed. Paine had pointed out, by inclination if not directly, that higher wages would increase prosperity, but "practical" men like John Partridge complained that continental firms, with their lower costs, better machinery and more sober (i.e. subservient) workers were aided in their competition with English textile firms by the working of the unreformed Poor Law; which, with the high price [high price?] of labour tended to demoralise the working classes.

[It is a complaint not unknown today...]

Alas! said Partridge

Alas! my country! to what a situation art thou reduced by the improvident expenditure of thy Government!(24)

A sentiment echoed by Charles Bage of Shrewsbury, who with his two partners had built the first all-fireproof factory (now Jones Maltings, and still standing), when he wrote to his friend, one of the Strutts,

I should much wish to know your view of the present state and prospects of this flourishing country. Nobody here seems capable of devising any plan for the employment of the many thousands that have nothing to do and consequently no bread to eat.(25)

But as the State of the Case had put it in 1757 -

why should the weavers be exempted from feeling the effects of bad times any more than their masters, or any other branches of the manufactory?

[Wasn't it Scott Fitzgerald who said "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me", to which Hemingway replied, "Yes, they have more money!"]

Amelioration of the application of the dismal science of Economics, and the support of the destitute poor, came late in Britain, and too late anyway for those who felt the worst effects of early industrial change. W.A. Miles, when reporting on his inspection of textile factories in the West Country in the 1840s, quoted a police sergeant of Minchinhampton, one Erasmus Charlton, who said he had seen many cases where the man and his wife and as many as seven children sleeping on the floor with only a torn quilt to cover them, children crying for food and parents with neither food nor money, nor work to obtain any. But one weaver, at least, said he would rather starve than go to the workhouse.(26)

The visionary William Blake put it better than most:

Compel the poor to live upon a crust of bread by soft  
mild arts.  
Smile then they frown, frown when the smile;  
and when a man looks pale,  
With labour and abstinence, say he looks healthy and  
happy:  
And when his children sicken, let them die;  
there are enough  
Born, even too many, and our earth will be  
overrun without these arts...(27)

Let us turn again to Isaac Watts.

And the same Providence hath allotted to the Poor the meaner  
Services, and hath given to the Rich the superior and more  
honourable Businesses of Life: nor is it possible, according  
to the present Course of Nature and human Affairs, to alter  
this Constitution of things, nor is it our Design to attempt  
any thing so unreasonable.

Which I offer without comment... Watts continues -

As the children of the Rich in general, ought to enjoy such  
an Education as may fit them for the better Businesses of  
Life, so the Children of the Poor (especially such as need  
the charity of their Neighbours) should not be generally  
educated in such a Manner as may raise them above the  
Services of a lower Station.

[Abolish the comprehensive school!]

And if it were possible, I would have every Charity School  
so constituted, that the Children of the Poor... might be  
employed in some Work and Labour, generally one Half of the  
Day; that it might have partly the Nature of a Work-house,  
as well as of a School, for all those who are to live by  
their hard Labour, rather than by their Learning.

As young King Richard II remarked to the followers of Wat  
Tyler, "Serfs you are, and serfs you will remain."(28)

[Department of Education, please note.]

As the writer of the pamphlet against the Factory Law of 1833  
(which in theory included schooling for juvenile workers)  
wrote:

The beautiful institutions of the Infant School were meant  
to open the capacity and even to prepare the child for  
future mechanical pursuits; but what will become of him  
between that period and the period of legal labour? Is he to  
be kept in all that interval at school, and if so who is to  
pay for it?(29)

[The answer to the first part of the last question is Yes; to  
the second, You.]

As a one-time school teacher I cannot refrain from adding the following extract from Walter Scott's novel Waverley, where one character says that while instruction must be rendered agreeable to youth,

the history of England is now reduced to a game of cards, the problems of mathematics to puzzles and riddles, and the doctrine of arithmetic may, we are assured, be sufficiently acquired by the spending a few hours a week at a new and complicated edition of the Royal Game of the Goose. [For which read Monopoly?]

[So much for the playway!]

It is often said that Britain was spared the worst excesses of the French Revolution (30) by the spread of Methodism. (Wesley gave his first sermon in Stroud standing on a butcher's block in the Shambles - (he was a very short man). However, Dissenters might later have taken heed from Hymn No. 544 in Congregational Praise Hymn Book.

Workman of God! O lose not heart,  
But learn what God is like;  
And in the darkest battlefield  
Thou shalt know where to strike.

Anticipating Marx, two British philosophers had changed the world, or at least the way in which we look at it. These were Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus. Let the last word (or nearly) belong to Malthus.

The advocate, for the present order of things is apt to treat the sect of speculative philosophers as a set of artful and designing knaves who preach up benevolence and draw captivating pictures of a happier state of society only the better to destroy the present establishments ... or as wild and mad-headed enthusiasts whose silly speculations and absurd paradoxes are not worthy the attention of any reasonable man. The advocate for the perfectibility of man, and of society, retorts on the defender of establishments a more than equal contempt. He brands him as the slave of the most miserable and narrow prejudices: or as the defender of the abuses of civil society only because he profits by them. In this unamicable contest the cause of truth cannot but suffer.(31)

Or, more succinctly,

The truth isn't easily pinned to a page. In the bathtub of history the truth is harder to hold than the soap, and much more difficult to find.(32)

## References

- 1 Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerback 1888. Also carved on his monument in Highgate Cemetry. This impressive and brooding work

was the work of a great friend of mine, who also painted sketches of the Stroud valleys on visits in the late 1920s.

- 2 Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations, 1776.
- 3 T.R. Malthus, An Essay on the Principles of Population, 1798.
- 4 5 Eliz I c.iv, An Act touching divers orders for artificers, labourers, servants of husbandry and apprentices: quoted in Select Documents in English Economic History, ed. by Bland, Brown and Tawney.
- 5 A State of the Case 1757. An anonymous pamphlet, possibly by James Dalloway (for whom see Victoria County History of Gloucestershire xi, index.).
- 6 Josiah Tucker, Dean of Gloucester 1751-99. Bishop Warburton said he made a religion of trade, but a trade of religion. the pamphlet appeared in 1757.
- 7 An Atlas of Industrializing Britain, ed. J.Langton and R.J. Morris. See maps for item 21; In 1837-9 the percentage of paupers was greatest south of a line from the Wash to Dorset, while the factory areas of the Pennines had fewest paupers. This is a reversal of the current spurious North-South "Divide".
- 8 Tucker op cit.
- 9 G.Turner, General View of the Agiculture of Gloucestershire, 1794.
- 10 Sir Frederick Morton Eden, State of the Poor, 1797.
- 11 Guzzling labourers are mentioned in Marshall's General View of Agricultural Reports of 1794; the quotation is from his General View of the Agriculture of Gloucestershire, 1796.
- 12 State of the Case, op cit.
- 13 W.Lawrence, Stroudwater a Poem, 1824. He was organist of Stroud parish church.
- 14 Thomas Rudge, General View of the Agriculture of Gloucestershire, 1805.
- 15 Isaac Watts, An Essay towards the Encouragement of Charity Schools, 1728.
- 16 Thomas Paine, Rights of Man, 1791/2.

- 17 See K.G.Ponting, The West of England Cloth Industry, 1957, and Julia de la Mann, The Cloth Industry in the West of England, (A. Sutton 1987 reprint).
- 18 W.H. Jessop of Cheltenham.
- 19 In Gloucestershire Repository, 1817.
- 20 Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, 1651.
- 21 See the Countryside Collection in the Northleach Museum, one of the 4 new Reformatory prisons built by Sir G.O. Paul to replace the ghastly County Gaol.
- 22 Various parish records in the Gloucestershire Record Office.
- 23 W. Lawrence op cit. Lawrence was given leave by Rodborough Vestry to work the parish quarry provided he employed able-bodied paupers.
- 24 J. Partridge op cit.
- 25 Letter from Charles Bage to P.S. (probably a Strutt) in the Shropshire Local History Collection (I think), in Shrewsbury Library.
- 26 W.A. Miles, one of the 4 Factory Inspectors for the 1833 Act, quoted in GRO Signal teaching aid on industry. His report was 1839, on the Condition of the Handloom Weavers.
- 27 William Blake, Vala or the Four Zoas. Blake, though difficult, is a major poet and (in my opinion) far superior to the facile Shelley and Keats. (Those who disagree need not write to me!)
- 28 Supposed to have been said by the young King when the Peasants Revolt protest was crushed. See also Tien An Men Square (the Square of Heavenly Peace no less!) in 1989.
- 29 Anonymous pamphlet, possibly by Mr. Sheppard.
- 30 For Lady Brcknell's remarks, see O. Wilde, The Importance of Being Ernest.
- 31 Malthus op cit.
- 32 Terry Pratchett, Sourcery (Corgi, 1989).