The Morning Chronicle's

LABOUR AND THE POOR

Volume VI

THE RURAL DISTRICTS

ALEXANDER MACKAY & SHIRLEY BROOKS

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Mullion Cove, Cornwall
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"The eldest boy, twelve years old, appeared, as he walked, more like a moving heap of rags and tatters than anything bearing the semblance of a human being. How his rags were kept on was a mystery which I believe none could solve, and if they had been taken off, it would have been impossible for the owner to have put them on again. They were never taken off; in fact he slept in the rags, as did his other brothers and sisters, for in the upper room there were no beds, no sheets, no blankets, no counterpanes."

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Preface

This work attempts to be a faithful reproduction of the "Labour and the Poor" letters as printed in *The Morning Chronicle*. Only obvious typographical errors and omissions have been corrected. Variations in the spelling and hyphenation of words have largely been retained. We hope any such inconsistencies prove to be of some historical interest to the reader.

As much as possible we have tried to recreate the original layout and styling of the text and all factual tables have been reproduced as closely to the originals as possible with only minimal alterations made where necessary to improve readability.

Not all letters were titled. Where missing we have added titles to the Table of Contents to assist navigation and explanation of content. The letters themselves are as per the originals.

A handful of illustrations have been added to each volume. These did not appear in the original text but hopefully provide added interest.

R. W.
K. B.

Introduction

In 1849 a leading London-based newspaper, *The Morning Chronicle*, undertook an investigation into the working and living conditions of the poor throughout England and Wales in the hope that their findings might lead to much needed change.

The reputed catalyst for their "Labour and the Poor" series was an article written by Henry Mayhew recording a journey into Bermondsey, one of the most deprived districts of London, which was printed in September 1849. Following this it was proposed that an in-depth investigation be carried out and "Special Correspondents", the investigators, were selected and distributed around the country. The first article or "Letter" appeared on the 18th of October 1849 and the series would run for almost 2 years and 222 letters.

The well-known and respected writers and journalists recruited for the task included Henry Mayhew who was assigned to the Metropolitan districts, Angus Bethune Reach to the Manufacturing districts, Alexander Mackay and Shirley Brooks to the Rural districts and Charles Mackay to investigate the cities of Birmingham and Liverpool. The author of the letters from Wales is as yet unknown.

It is clear from references made in the letters that Alexander Mackay commenced his investigation in the counties of Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire, before examining the south western counties of Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset. He then proceeded eastward through Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex and Kent. He began an inquiry into the counties of Gloucestershire, Monmouthshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire, but only one letter of this was published. In 1850 he accepted the task of travelling to India to investigate the viability of expanding the cotton producing areas and trade in the East Indies.

It is most likely that Shirley Brooks commenced his portion of the investigation in the eastern counties of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, continuing on to cover Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire,

Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire, before proceeding to the midland counties of Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Rutland, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.

The "Labour and the Poor" letters were extremely popular at the time, being widely read throughout the nation and even abroad. The revelations in them caused quite a stir amongst the middle and upper classes of Victorian society. *Letters to the Editor* poured in with donations for specific cases of distress that appeared in the letters and also for the general alleviation of the suffering of the poor. A special fund was set up by *The Morning Chronicle* to collect and distribute these donations.

These *Letters to the Editor* have been included in this series, predominantly in the Metropolitan district volumes whose letters elicited the majority of responses. They provide a unique window into the thoughts and sentiments of the Victorian readership as they react to the incredible accounts of misery and desperation being unveiled.

The Morning Chronicle's extraordinary and unsurpassed "Labour and the Poor" investigation provides an unparalleled insight into the people of the period, their living and working conditions, their feelings, their language, their sufferings and their struggles for survival amidst the poverty and destitution of 19th century Britain. An investigation of such magnitude had never before been attempted and the undertaking was truly of epic proportions. Its impact at the time was profound. Its historical importance today is without question.

The Morning Chronicle, Saturday, October 20, 1849.

LABOUR AND THE POOR.

THE RURAL DISTRICTS.

[FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.]

Letter I.

At no previous time, perhaps, has the attention of thinking men been so generally or so anxiously directed to questions of a social character as at present. The events of the last two years have led to this, indicating, as they have done beyond all dispute, that the political systems of Europe were, and still are, tainted with a more deeply-seated malady than that which assumes the type of mere political defects. The extent to which the social systems of the Continent were rotten to their core, became evident from the suddenness with which Government after Government crumbled beneath the shock of the French Revolution. Two States alone stood firm amid the storm, and these two (England and Russia) represented respectively the two extremes of political existence in Europe. In the one, order was maintained by the absolute supremacy of force; in the other, it was preserved by the ascendancy of sound opinion.

Proud of it as we may be, and thankful, as we no doubt are, for our escape from the ravages of the revolutionary tempest, we must carefully guard against the error of supposing that the social edifice which gave us shelter is absolutely perfect, because in the day of trial it did not prove itself utterly defective. Strong and compact as it showed itself, as a whole, there were, nevertheless, points at which it gave indications of weakness, which it would be folly to disregard. That which withstands one rude assault is not necessarily proof against a succession of shocks. Whilst to systems which had fewer strong points than weak ones the storm carried destruction and overthrow, it but indicated in ours such as were weak, that we might strengthen them for the future. Shall we profit by the warning, or are we, too, to wait until we see the hand-writing on the wall? There can be no greater enemy to the fortunes of England than the unqualified panegyrist of her institutions. Even had we enjoyed a complete immunity from the

dangers of the recent upheavings of the moral elements throughout the world, it would be presumption as well as folly in us to suppose that we had not much to do to render our exemption from such dangers perpetual. But we had no such immunity. If order maintained its ascendancy, it cannot be forgotten that disaffection was in our streets. The revolutionary wave spread to our very doors, and, for the moment, threatened to involve us, too, in the inundation. If the movement here led to discomfiture instead of to a catastrophe, it was simply because the elements of order amongst us were stronger than those of confusion. But the elements of confusion were with us, and are with us still. It is true that they may not be formidable enough to overthrow the Government, or bring down society about our ears; but it is the tendency of weeds, if unplucked, to monopolize the soil, and of cancerous growths, if not carefully removed, speedily to involve the more vital parts of the system. So it is with society. Its weak points, if left to extend, will soon spread to the danger of the strong. What are the weak points of our system? Is it the political machine that is out of gear? The bulk, even of its most ardent admirers, admit that it has its defects, but these are less organic in their nature than defects of detail. Where, then, is the real difficulty? Is it in our social system? If here, it is all the more serious, for it is, in general, much easier to adjust a political difficulty than to cure a deep-rooted and wide-spread social derangement.

To some the very suggestion may seem strange, that there may be something radically wrong with the structure of English society. We are so much in the habit of regarding ourselves in the van of civilization, and as taking strides in the direction of improvement which no other people can equal, that we can with difficulty be brought to suspect the existence of serious blemishes in our social system. But it would be well for us to content ourselves less with superficial observation, and betake ourselves more to searching scrutiny. Such a course may possibly reveal to us a state of things which prejudice would at once stamp as unreal, and to which even candour itself would be inclined to turn the ear of disbelief. Is our social fabric that sound compact and harmonious whole which it appears to be, or is it, after all, but a deceptive image, with (as was said of the Russian empire) its body of brass and its feet of clay? In times like these, when political fabrics elsewhere are being engulphed in the quicksands at their foundations, this is a question into which it is not only desirable but necessary to inquire. And in pursuing the inquiry, let us not be mis-

led by appearances. Society with us may look not only ornate, but also firm and stable; but is it in reality so from its base upwards? If it has improved, and is still improving, has it done and is it still doing so, as a whole, or only in some of its parts? If the latter, which is the laggard part? It is to be feared that the lower orders have not kept pace in the race of improvement with the upper classes; and the question is, why are they not better off?

Public attention in this country is daily concentrating itself more and more on this important subject. The relation subsisting, and which ought to subsist, between the different classes of society, is fast becoming the question of questions. Are our social duties towards each other adequately performed, or the obligations attaching to our respective positions properly fulfilled? Does wealth properly acquit itself of its obligations to poverty? Does ignorance find as active a foe in intelligence as it should? Is the punishment of crime on its right footing; and are the temptations to crime not unnecessarily multiplied? Are the relations between labour and capital satisfactorily adjusted; and are the physical, moral, and religious wants of the masses sedulously cared for? These, and others like these, are the great practical questions which are now rapidly supplanting in men's minds discussions on mere speculative topics. There are none more interested in their proper solution than the upper classes themselves. The chain of mutual dependence is complete, extending upwards as well as downwards; albeit the extremes of society are so far apart, that they scarcely seem to belong to the same general system. But let circumstances separate them as much as they may, they cannot escape the common tie which binds them together in the chain of mutual dependence. As well might the gilded weathercock, which overlooks half a county from the top of Salisbury Cathedral, fancy itself independent of the foundations of the spire, as the upper classes imagine that their interests are separate from those of the lower orders of the State. Their interests, when properly understood, are found to be common interests; their wrongs common wrongs. But there is this difference between them, that the upper classes have at their disposal means for pushing their interests and redressing their wrongs, which the lower have not at command. The question, therefore, as regards the safety and stability of society, resolves itself into a consideration of the condition of the lower orders. There could be no more fitting time than the present for embarking on such an inquiry. The times are tranquil. But let us not be deceived by the

smoothness of the surface. If we have surmounted some dangers, we have others still to meet.

Sub-soil ploughing is frequently resorted to as a remedy for exhausted soils. It is useful thus to bring that which is below occasionally to the surface. It is equally beneficial to bring now and then to light the truths which may be extracted from the depths of society. On others has devolved the task of doing this in the metropolis and the manufacturing districts, whilst to me has been assigned that of driving a deep furrow through the moral soil of the counties. In doing so I shall take them in groups, confining my observations in the first place to the counties of Bucks, Berks, Wilts, and Oxford.

To this group there are many features which are common, whilst in other respects they are distinguished from each other by marked peculiarities. They are all inland counties, and all chiefly dependent upon the same species of industry, being mainly, if not wholly, agricultural. They have every variety of soil, from the heavy clay of the Vale of Aylesbury, to the drier and lighter slopes of Salisbury Plain. They are also characterized by considerable diversity of climate, not varying so much as regards heat and cold, as in respect to dryness and humidity. The consequence is, that agriculture, in almost every form which it can assume, is extensively prosecuted in the district. The combined area of the four counties is 2,812,300 acres, being about one-eleventh part that of all England. There are few spots throughout the whole of this wide expanse in which agriculture could not be pushed to its highest development. The largest tracts incapable of high cultivation are to be found in the southern division of Wiltshire, the surface of which is broken by the low chalk hills, which, stretching through Hampshire, run through Wilts, to the borders of Dorset and Somerset. But in parts, even of this bleak and rugged district, such as Salisbury Plain, corn is produced in abundance. In some tracts, however, the chalk comes so close to the surface as to preclude the possibility of converting them into arable land, and there is no alternative but to leave them as downs for the pasture of sheep. With scarcely any other exception, the whole area of the counties in question is divided between arable and pasture lands; dairy farming, to which the latter are chiefly turned, forming a larger feature in the agriculture of Bucks and Wiltshire than in that of Berks or Oxfordshire, but being more or less common to all. There is a great deal of pasture land in the northern division of Wilts, which is low and flat, and dairy farms are not unfrequent in its central and south-western

districts. Throughout the greater portion of the centre of Buckinghamshire, stretching from Thame to near Leighton, particularly from Aylesbury to Leighton, dairy farming is the rule, the raising of crops being the exception. The same may be said of the tract lying between Aylesbury and Bicester. Most of this district is comprised in what is generally known as the Vale of Aylesbury. In the southern portion of the county, the plough is very generally used, whilst in the northern, that abutting upon Northamptonshire, the higher style of farming common to that county, comprising green crops, is in vogue. In Berks and Oxfordshire, on the other hand, the dairy farms are more isolated, there being in neither of them such continuous stretches of pasture land as in the other counties of the group. In addition to a fertile soil, thus yielding every variety of production common to this country, they have scattered over them, as stimulants to their agricultural industry, such market towns as Reading, Windsor, Salisbury, Marlborough, Devizes, Warminster, Trowbridge, Westbury, Calne, Chippenham, Oxford, Thame, Aylesbury, Buckingham, Wycombe, &c. They are intersected by numerous and excellent roads, and some of them are well irrigated by canals, whilst they are now all directly connected by railway with the great mart of the nation, and the chief focus of its industrial energies—the metropolis.

Having thus briefly glanced at their great physical features, let us now view them in their moral aspect.

The population of England was, by the last census, about 15,000,000 of souls. This, distributed over the whole area of the country, which is about 32,247,600 acres, would give about one person to every 2 1-7 acres. The population of the four counties under consideration was 737,496, which, distributed over their combined area, already noticed as being 2,812,390 acres, gave one person to about every 3 1-6 acres. The population of Wilts was 258,733 souls, its area 874,880 acres, giving one person to about every 3½ acres. In Bucks, the proportion was one to a little over 3 acres, its population being 155,983 souls, and its area 472,320 acres. In Berks, having 161,447 inhabitants, it was one to scarcely 3 acres, the whole area of the county being 431,280 acres; whist in Oxford, with an area of 483,840 acres and 161,643 inhabitants, it was about one to every 3 acres. In Wilts the pressure of population upon the soil is the least, in Berks it is the greatest in the group; but even in the latter it is considerably less than the average pressure throughout England. Taking the average of the group there is in it above an acre more to

each individual than there is throughout the whole of England; in other words, the population of these four counties, before it could press in the same degree upon their surface as the whole population of England does upon the whole area of England, would have to increase about 45 per cent.

In 1841 there were:—

	Farmers and Graziers.		Agricultural Labourers.
In Wilts	4,456	—	31,099
— Berks	1,876	—	18,649
— Bucks	2,465	—	18,860
And in Oxford	2,365	—	17,909

That is to say, there were in Wiltshire scarcely seven labourers to each farmer, in Berks somewhat more than nine, and in Bucks and Oxfordshire about seven and a half. Of the whole number of agricultural labourers in Wiltshire, there are about 5,700 under 20 years of age, of which number about 700 are females. In Berks the number under 20 years of age is 3,330, of whom only 318 are females; in Bucks 2,838, of whom only 136 are females; and in Oxford 2,937, of whom only 14 were returned as females. In none of them does the number of females of all ages employed come near the number of males employed under 20 years of age. The number of males under 20 years of age returned as employed in agricultural labour in Wilts was less than one-fifth of the whole number of males in the county returned as under 20 and over 10 years of age, including the town as well as the country population. In Oxford the proportion was also less than one-fifth; in Berks it was about a sixth, and in Bucks about one-seventh.

In 1841, there were engaged in trade, commerce, and manufactures in Wilts, 28,027 persons, against 36,390 engaged in agriculture. In Berks the numbers were 16,479, against 21,249; in Bucks, 19,664, against 21,897; and in Oxford, 17,369, against 30,789. It will be seen that it is in Wilts and Bucks that the proportion of those engaged in commerce, trade, and manufactures approaches the nearest to an equality with that of those engaged in agriculture. The extent to which lace-making and straw platting are carried on in the latter accounts for this. In the former the proportion of the first-mentioned class of persons was at one time much greater than now, the manufacturing industry of Wilts having, in common with that of the whole south-west of England, fallen greatly back of late years, owing to causes which

will be explained hereafter. The total number of persons returned as engaged in all occupations in Wilts, was 88,756; in Berks, 55,678; in Bucks, 54,340; and in Oxford, 53,238. In the first three counties more than one-third of the whole population were returned as employed, and in the last, somewhat less than one-third. Of the residue of the population of each, the great bulk consists of women and children of tender age, the rest being such as were returned as independent, and those represented as pensioners, paupers, almspeople, and beggars. The number returned as independent in Wilts was 5,996, or about 2.32 per cent. of the whole population. In Berks the number was 4,779, being nearly 3 per cent. of the whole population. In Bucks it was 3,084, or less than 2 per cent.; and in Oxford, 3,857, or 2.38 per cent. of the whole. Taking the four counties together, the average number returned as independent was about 2.40 per cent. of their aggregate population. The numbers returned, at the same time, as paupers, almspeople, and beggars, were—in Wilts, 3,790; in Berks, 2,229; in Bucks, 1,695; and in Oxford, 1,622; making in all 9,336 returned as absolutely dependent—being about 1.23 per cent. of their aggregate population. The annual value of real property, as rated to the income tax, is in Wilts, £1,424,545; in Berks, £1,016,474; in Bucks, £832,889; and in Oxford, £1,025,620—making the total aggregate annual value of the property of the four counties, as thus rated, £4,299,528, or about 5.22 per cent. of the whole real property rateable to the income tax in England. The amount expended in each county in 1847, for the relief of the poor, was, in Wilts, £141,133—being an increase of 6 per cent. over the expenditure in 1846; in Berks, £85,252—being an increase of 8 per cent. over that of the previous year; in Bucks, £82,838—showing an increase of 7 per cent. in one year; and in Oxford, £87,033—also showing an increase of 7 per cent. Thus, the aggregate increase of expenditure for the poor in 1847, as compared with that for 1846, was almost 7 per cent. The greatest increase was in Berkshire, but that was far below the increase in some other counties, such as Nottingham, in which, for the year, it was no less than 19 per cent.

Having thus taken a rapid survey of the four counties in question, in their physical and moral aspects, it is now time to proceed to the consideration of what is proposed as the more particular subject of inquiry—the condition of the labouring classes engaged in agriculture. The general summary which has been made of the capabilities, resources, wealth, burdens, and population of the district, will be useful, inasmuch as it will enable the reader, before the real state of the

case is laid before him, to form his own estimate of what should be the condition of the different classes of people inhabiting such a district, with which estimate he can afterwards contrast the real circumstances of the peasantry as they will be divulged to him. In laying bare what these circumstances are, it will be my first endeavour to give as accurate a description as possible of the labouring classes in their physical condition, in doing which I shall first deal with them in connection with their dwellings and persons, leaving the subjects of wages and diet for a future communication.

It is a generally received opinion that the condition of the female in a community indicates the stage attained by it in civilization. This, however, would only appear to be a correct standard of judgment after several steps in advance have already been taken: for it is generally found that society has made considerable progress from its rude starting point, ere the condition of the female undergoes any visible amelioration. The first symptom of man's progress is furnished in the character of his habitation. Whatever progress he may make in other directions, every future step he takes is marked by improvement in this. First the hovel, then the hut, and lastly the house, progressing in perfection until, having become comfortable, it is rendered elegant and ornate. Such is the result when man is left free to develop his condition. Every step he takes in the higher walks of civilization, is accompanied, if not preceded, by a superior degree of comfort and refinement in his external life. Hence it is that his physical condition becomes the test of his intellectual and moral development. To judge of the progress of a nation, we must consider its people in their relations to external nature; and in doing so it will not do to confine our observations to any one class of society. To estimate aright the civilization of England, we must not confine ourselves to such tests as Buckingham Palace, Stafford House, or Chatsworth. It frequently happens that the centre can only be raised at the expense of the circumference, and the greatest monuments to the glory of a nation have frequently been the most striking proofs of its wretchedness. There is a high and there is a low grade of civilization in every country, and its average advancement can only be known by considering them along with the grades which intervene. The distance between the two extremes of English civilization is as great as that between St. Paul's and a mud hovel. To keep the fabric together, it is as well that we should keep its extremes constantly in view.

There is nothing attended with unmixed good—not even railways. They have called into existence a larger travelling class than before; and it is the tendency of travelling to bring more or less to light every phase of national life. But although men travel now by hundreds where they formerly travelled by tens, less is known now than formerly of the rural life of England. In the old coaching days a traveller was dragged along the highways of the country, on which its towns and villages were standing—giving him an opportunity of observing every form of English life, from that of the peasant to that of the peer. At the end of his journey some definite impressions remained on his mind of the scenes through which he had passed. He had observed the nature and capabilities of the different rural districts, and the extent to which they were neglected or turned to account. He had seen the dwellings of the labourer clustered in hamlets and villages along the road, and the mansions of the proprietors peering, one after another, through the foliage which embowered them; and as he drove up the main street of each town, he discerned its peculiarities and the direction of its industry. He had thus an opportunity of studying the life of his country in its lowest and its highest stages of development, and in the phase which it assumes when, under the stimulus of numbers and competition, it puts forth its most concentrated energies. But to the great bulk of travellers this opportunity is no longer extended. We have made a small England of it by means of our railways and electric telegraphs. Thoughts now travel with the swiftness of lightning, and men travel almost with the speed of thought. We are wafted from London to Liverpool in one-fifth the time formally occupied in the journey. But what do we see and learn by the way? The lines of the old highways are forsaken, the least populous parts of the country are traversed, towns are shunned instead of passed through, and the impressions left upon the traveller are of the most unsatisfactory and confused description. At his journey's end, he has but a dim recollection of fields, hedges, and trees; tunnels, embankments, and cuttings; towns, now on this hand and now on that: but all flying past him, like the phantasmagoria of a dream—his senses alternately excited by the dread of an accident and the shrieking of the locomotive. He has a less definite impression even of the physical features of the country, than he can get of the Mississippi from a visit to the monster picture at the Egyptian Hall. He has little or no chance of learning the different modes of life and the varied circumstances of the people. Men now travel over, where they formerly travelled through, the country.

In undertaking a journey they now think only of its extremes—the chief consideration attached to the intermediate space being that it comprises so many miles to be rapidly overcome. The consequence is, that, although the gain to trade and commerce may be incalculable, the stock of general knowledge derived from a varied and extensive personal observation is diminished. It therefore results that the generation of Englishmen now springing up, will know less of the rural life of England than their forefathers, unless the information which they cannot now so readily gather for themselves is supplied them from other sources. It is of the last importance to the well-being of society that this information should be constantly and extensively furnished; for it is to be feared that, whilst the material improvements of the day are such as are in their direct benefits confined almost exclusively to the upper and middle classes, their effect is to elevate those classes to a point where they, more or less, lose sight altogether of the lower orders. The danger of this is obvious, especially at a time when material and social considerations are exciting such an influence on political conditions. At this moment, in all quarters of the land, a cry is coming up to us from the lower orders. Is it the plaint of want, or the wail of despair? If either, it is as well that we should both understand and meet it, lest it come upon us with yet more startling echoes. To know the ground on which we stand, we must ascertain what the depths of society can reveal.

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