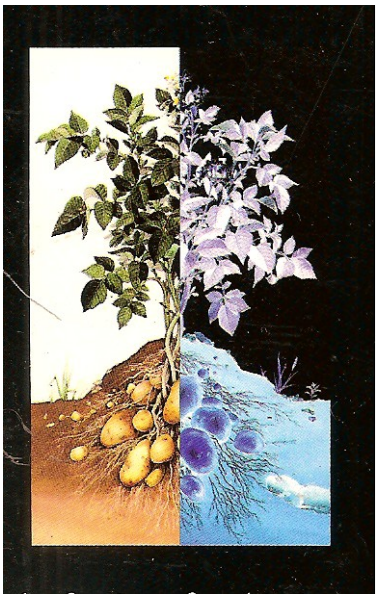
‘Until the Potatoes Come Round Again’



Letters to The Times in 1846

Judith Stinton

On May 7 1846 a letter from Richard Brinsley Sheridan, grandson of the playwright and Dorset landowner, was published in The Times.(1) His action had been prompted by a petition, which he attached, from ‘The Poor Humble and Obedient Labourers’ of his Bettiscombe estate in the Marshwood Vale, describing their unhappy situation. They and their families were unable to live on the Dorset labourers’ standard wage of seven shillings a week – ‘and to add to our trials, the potato crops failed’.

Sheridan had immediately paid a visit to Bettiscombe. He arrived while the labourers were eating their dinner, a meal which consisted of ‘a small quantity of horse-beans [broad beans] and turnip-tops boiled in water’. When he asked one of the women what she would be serving for supper, she cheerfully replied, ‘Why, bless you, Sir, horse-beans and turnip-tops’.

Sheridan also attached a copy of a further letter of April 11, which he had written to the local Poor Law Guardians on behalf of William Soper, one of his tenants in Maiden Newton, a village which bordered his Frampton estate. Thirty-six year old Soper lived with his wife, Mary Ann, and their six children, Samuel, John, George, Elizabeth, Emma and baby Walter. Samuel aged 11, earned 1/6 a week, while his father earned 7/6. They paid 1/6 a week in rent and could no longer manage.(2)

Soper had applied for outdoor relief, requesting 'a pair of half-boots and for an allowance until the potatoes come round again'. (For the labourer, strong boots were essential, and cost about 12s. a pair.) His application was rejected, and the family were sent to Dorchester workhouse. Sheridan's subsequent appeal was also unsuccessful.

The potato crop had failed in West Dorset in the autumn of 1845. This failure was widespread, occurring in other parts of England and Scotland, in Belgium, the Netherlands and America. Most disastrously and infamously of all, it failed nearly everywhere in Ireland.(3)

Potato blight had happened in Ireland in other years, and so was not at first regarded with much alarm, as crop failures were usually short-lived. But what followed was swift and shocking. W S Trench, an Irish land agent, has left an account of his personal experience of the blight.(4)

> On August 1st of that calamitous year, 1846, I was startled by hearing a sudden and strange rumour that all the potato fields in the district were blighted; and that a stench had arisen emanating from their decaying stalks. I immediately rode up to visit my crop, and test the truth of this report; but I found it as luxuriant as ever, in full blossom, the stalks matted across each other with richness, and promising a splendid produce, without any unpleasant smell whatever…
>
> On August 6, 1846 – I shall not readily forget the day – I rode up as usual to my mountain property, and my feelings may be imagined when before I saw the crop, I smelt the awful stench, now so well known and recognized as the death-sign of each field of potatoes…the luxuriant stalks soon withered, the leaves decayed, the disease extended to the tubers, and the stench from the rotting of such an immense amount of rich vegetable matter became almost intolerable…

The potato blight of 1845, *Phytophlora infestans*, was a new strain of the disease. In his book on the Irish Famine, Peter Gray ascribes its appearance to the growth of the international trade in seed potatoes and the American use of guano imported from Peru, which was probably the source of the fungus. 'The seed trade also accounts for the blight's transatlantic leap to the Low Countries. Once established in temperate climates, the blight depended mainly on damp conditions for its propagation'.

The potato – an earthy relative of the tomato, pepper and aubergine – had first arrived in Ireland around 1585. The plant originated in Peru and was brought to Europe in the sixteenth century by the Spanish Conquistadores. How it arrived in Ireland is not known: though there are stories about its advent. Sir Walter Raleigh was said to have grown the plants on his estates at Youghal, Co. Cork. – or perhaps they were washed up on the county's shores from wrecked ships of the Spanish Armada.(5)

Whatever its provenance, the potato rapidly became popular, and proved to be a nutritious vegetable, rich in calcium and minerals, vitamins and protein. Eaten with buttermilk, it provided a balanced diet. The potato was easy to grow, whereas wheat did not thrive in the damp climate. It cropped plentifully and could be cooked over an open fire.

Brought to England at about the same time, supposedly by Sir Frances Drake, the new foodstuff was initially regarded with suspicion – it was known to belong to the same family as Deadly Nightshade – and took longer to become accepted than it had been in Ireland. By 1846 the potato was a crucial part of the Dorsetshire labourer's diet, eaten with turnips, cabbage and a rough bread made from grist.

'Grist' was defined by Sir Frederick Treves in an essay of 1916 (6) as 'debris corn or tailings…such refuse as remains after the best wheat has been separated from the mass of grain. It was the boast of the farmer that his labourer had at least one supreme advantage – he could "get a grist". He could, however, only get it on terms, viz., on the farmer's terms'.

The farmer's terms were often exorbitant. What the labourer bought was 'little better than chicken food' and as much nutritional value. A miller from the Blandford area reported that the grist that the labourers brought for grinding was 'very bad. I do not think it is worth 3s. a bushel. I don't much like having anything to do with it, for I am obliged to keep a separate pair of stones to grind it. If it is ground by the same stones I use to grind the finer sort of wheat, it fouls the better sort and spoils it'.(7)

Sometimes the farmer would provide a load of firewood in part payment, and there might be the opportunity for 'tut work' (overtime), but neither of these benefits could be relied on.

Fortunately, the agricultural worker also had a 'potato ground' (known as a 'lug' in the Dorset dialect). Like the similar grounds of the Irish cottiers, this could be provided either free of charge or for a nominal rent. Half an acre of ground could

yield 160 lbs of potatoes per week during a year or 3 lbs a day for every member of an eight-person family.

The labourers were tenants of the farmers, who in turn paid rent to the landowner. Landlords (particularly in Ireland, where they had a similar hierarchy) could be absentee, with a land agent left in charge of the estate. The system was very open to corruption and exploitation. As a landowner himself, Sheridan acknowledged in his letter that he was in no position to criticise, although he did blame the tenant farmers for the low wage levels.

> I do not shrink from the thousand reflections which may be passed upon me from these cases, herein exposed, having occurred on my own property. I do not profess to be a bit less culpable for the existence of such cases of misery and privation than any other landlord in the county. I endeavoured to remedy these evils by calling attention to the course pursued towards the labourer, and by setting an example of paying for work done in money, instead of in kind...'

'Truck' was one method of paying in kind rather than money. In his essay, Frederick Treves cites the example of a farmer in Sturminster Marshall who paid his workers with tickets exchangeable only for goods in the village shop, which happened to be run by his mother. 'This beneficent transaction was called "paying over the counter."' The quality of the food bought by this method was often doubtful: the labourers could be sold diseased meat and chalky 'skim milk' cheese. No money ever changed hands, and it was in fact a form of slavery.

Sheridan's own gesture was laudable, if inadequate, in the circumstances. He was a man of liberal views, in favour of a wider franchise. In the previous year he had become MP for Shaftesbury, and from 1852-1868 he was one of the two members for Dorchester. In 1863 he built an elementary school in Frampton; he also built a reading-room and, in 1868, a row of four almshouses.(8)

His acquisition of the Frampton estate had been unexpected. For well over a hundred years it had been in the possession of the Browne family, until the line died out and the estate passed into the hands of a relative by marriage, Sir Colquhoun Grant. Marcia, his last surviving child, was the heir.

Alan Chedzoy has written of the drama which followed.(9)

> To his consternation, in 1835, Sir Colquhoun discovered that the girl was conducting a love affair with a certain Richard Brinsley Sheridan. This was

> not the famous author of *The School for Scandal*, but his grandson and namesake, a profligate, penniless, but charming man, ten years Marcia's senior.

While Sir Colquhoun's back was turned, Richard, like his father and grandfather before him, eloped with his bride-to-be. Before they could be stopped, they had been married 'at the anvil' in Gretna Green. Sir Colquhoun died shortly afterwards and, as husband to the heir, Sheridan inherited the estate.

He took his role very seriously. As well as his parliamentary duties he served as a magistrate, was a High Sheriff and Deputy Lieutenant of Dorset. But when it came to improving the lot of the agricultural workers he was prepared only to go so far, and no further. But there was another, far more radical letter-writer to the Times that year, and for many years to follow.

Sidney Godolphin Osborne (10) was a direct descendant of the Lord Godolphin who had been Queen Anne's Prime Minister, and of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough. After education at Rugby and Oxford, he took holy orders, a move decided for him by his father. In 1841 he accepted the Dorset living of Durweston, which was in the gift of Lord Portman. He remained there until his retirement in 1875 on the death of his wife. With his privileged background, he could have been in line for a bishopric, but as Arnold White, editor of his letters, observed, Osborne had 'no bent towards theological achievements'. He was interested in medicine – particularly in diseases – and in surgery. He was a Low Churchman, and a great talker. His sermons, made usually without notes, were much admired. As well as his many letters, he wrote books and pamphlets, the latter mainly concerned with the need to improve the housing of the labourers.

Sidney Godolphin Osborne ('S. O. G.')

Once in Durweston, he soon realised the squalid conditions in which the village people existed. Only a year after he had accepted his living , in a letter of December 26 1842, Osborne gave evidence to the Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioner on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture.(11) He wrote that although the 'most common vices' of the agricultural labourer had been 'exposed with no hesitating pens', the many difficulties of his life – which Osborne detailed – were disregarded. His observations excited the wrath of George Bankes, irascible MP for Dorset, who attacked him in the House of Commons, alleging that he was abusing his position. Bankes claimed that Dorset farm workers earned 11/- a week and were happy with their lot. He demanded that Osborne should be censured by his Bishop and wanted him arraigned before the Bar in the House. Osborne had made a serious enemy; Bankes continued to attack him at every opportunity.

In response, Sidney Godolphin Osborne ('S. G. O.') began writing to The Times.(12) From the very beginning, Osborne laid the blame for the labourers' sufferings not, like Sheridan, on the tenant farmers, who he said had their own difficulties, but on the landlords: 'the origin of the evil is to be found when the remedy is looked for, viz., in the landowners'. On November 25 1844 he wrote that they were, contrary to their own opinion, no more important than the rest of the 'herd of babes'.(13)

> There would be the same manifest vexation of spirit in the operation of teeth-cutting, where the gums were rubbed in the one case with a gold-set, Queen's-gift coral, or in the other with well-mouthed shank-bone of a sheep which provident mothers keep on their chimney-pieces for that purpose…

A letter of December 30 (14) in the same year is used for mockery of George Bankes – written, it would seem with great enjoyment. Bankes had been speech-making in Blandford: 'Here is the county member, a leading man of his party, at an agricultural dinner; excuse the comparison – a cock on his own dunghill'.
In his address, Bankes did not deny that Dorset had a 'bad name', but ascribed it to the county's treatment of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834, and (rather oddly) to the philanthropy of Lord Shaftesbury.

Osborne provided other reasons for Dorset's ill reputation.

> We have Cheshire cheese, Devonshire cream, Norfolk turkeys, Essex calves, Wiltshire bacon, and other provincial delicacies. But for large families existing on 8s., or even 7s., a-week, for undrained mud floors, for a dozen or

> more of all sexes and ages in one bedroom, for every other form of squalid brutish degradation, we go to Dorsetshire.

On May 28 1846 (15) he wrote to the newspaper in support of Sheridan: 'What matters is not who says it, but what is said about the conditions.' The labourers were housed 'with less regard to decency than farm beasts'; their wages had left them 'in a condition of scarcely intermittent pauperism'; they were losing their rights to the commons and to gleaning, and were being forced to move to the towns. Osborne was persisting in his campaign. George Bankes complained bitterly that The Times 'honoured the county of Dorset with two commissioners – one itinerant, and only an occasional visitor; the other resident'. The resident commissioner, his *bête noire*, was to contribute to the newspaper for forty years, and 'never earned a farthing' for his contributions. He was taken very seriously, and his letters were often given pride of place.

The first of an influential series of letters on the 'Condition of the Peasantry in Dorsetshire', filed by 'Our Own Correspondent, Blandford' appeared in The Times on June 18 1846.(16) These six articles were not written by Osborne, but by the 'occasional visitor', who said he had only a 'short acquaintance with the county and its peasantry'. However Osborne was evidently involved in their production. Many of the reports came from areas around his parish, from villages like Milton Abbas, Hilton and Stourpaine.

The itinerant correspondent began by comparing the distress in Dorset to that of Ireland: 'The recent debates in the House of Commons, in which the condition of the agricultural labourer of Dorsetshire was made the subject of discussion, have, naturally enough, produced a considerable degree of excitement in the public mind.' Disregarding the difference in scale of the two crop failures, he went on to say that in one way the situation was worse in Dorset, because the labourers there were ill-accustomed to such disasters. For his own part, Osborne had been concerned that his own people's sufferings might be disregarded, with all attention diverted to the situation in Ireland.

The correspondent visited much of the county, from Blandford to Corfe Castle, from Lyme Regis to Sherborne. One of the places he found the most shocking was Stourpaine, with its grossly overcrowded cottages where, he said, 'it is no matter of wonder that there are more illegitimate children in Stourpain than in any village of equal size in the Union of Blandford'.

He discovered too that if a person was to die in the bedroom which the family shared, 'we let the children get dead asleep before we take them to bed, and in the morning we pull them out of bed and hurry them down stairs before they are properly awake'. The correspondent concluded that 'the causes of the prevailing distress' were 'apathy and indifference on the part of the landed proprietor, and the grasping and closefisted policy of the farmer'.

Matters were no better in Corfe Castle, part of George Bankes's estate.(17) The writer challenged the 'pleasing and truly Arcadian picture' which had been painted of the village in a local newspaper report:

> We thought it was a good opportunity to interrogate several of the working labourers as to the wages they received, &c. To satisfy ourselves we took three or four as an example, and were highly gratified and pleased at the happy and contented manner in which they answered the different questions put to them. They all said their earnings throughout the year were eight shillings a week, and that many in the villages earned extra-wages in hay and corn harvest. They each had a good cottage to dwell in (wind and water-tight) and 'always kept in good repair'; added to this was a good sized piece of garden-ground well-stocked; each had also a quarter of an acre of potato ground, and as much fuel as they could burn by going after it. For all these comforts they paid but 2/. per annum, and expressed themselves as being perfectly happy and comfortable.

The correspondent's own calculations showed that a labouring family of four people in Corfe would in fact have a 'weekly deficiency' of 2s.6d. Only in the 'immediate vicinity' of Sherborne, where his report ended, were conditions any more acceptable, thanks to the silk mills which provided employment for the local women. He wrote:

> I now close my mission. The state of the Dorsetshire labourer has been fully displayed in your columns, and surely now that his case is known, it can not fail to awaken the general compassion in his favour, and procure for this deserving class able and zealous advocates who will plead the cause with effect, and rescue him from the miserable and abject state into which he is sunk.

Further interest was aroused on September 5th when the Illustrated London News followed these reports with a double-page spread on 'The Peasantry of Dorsetshire, 1846'.(18)

> The attention of the public has of late been drawn to the condition of the labouring population of Dorsetshire, by a series of graphic Letters which have appeared within the last three or four months in *The Times* Journal. The inquiry is a subject of paramount interest at a time when the increase of the comforts of the labouring classes is largely occupying the consideration of philanthropists: and the careful collection of such information as is contained in these documents must, doubtless, prove of beneficial aid towards this great work of social improvement.

The paper dispatched an artist to the Blandford area, and used four of his illustrations to accompany extracts from The Times reports. The artist commented on the deceptively picturesque appearance of some of the thatched cottages, particularly one in East Morden which was 'a charmingly picturesque *bit* for the painter; though its propped-up walls, and decaying thatched roof, but too closely indicate the privation and suffering of the inmates'. Appearances could be deceptive.

Interior of a Dorset Labourer's Cottage, from a Sketch made in 1846.

Yet the devastating account of cottage conditions which followed was somewhat weakened by the article's conclusion, which revived the 'Arcadian picture' of life in Bankes' Corfe Castle. This eulogy was accompanied by an engraving of some 'Dorsetshire Peasantry', a well-shod, be-smocked and bonneted group, in stark contrast to the family shown in the preceding illustration of a Dorsetshire cottage interior. The optimistic tone was echoed by Frederick Treves seventy years later.

> The Dorset farm labourer, although "steeped to the lips in poverty," although always on the verge of starvation and condemned to a life of sordid drudgery, was not only patient and uncomplaining but actually cheerful. He faced his position with that courage and determination which have ever been characteristic of the Dorset people and with a lightness of heart which no hardship could dismay'.

If the labourers were accepting of their lot then, conveniently, there was no need for urgent action. Osborne thought differently. He never faltered in his campaign. On August 24 he reported to The Times that around Ryme Intrinseca in Dorset the potato blight was still continuing.(19)

> The potato crop is a failure through the whole district. I do not believe a third will be fit for food. This is of no small importance, for the only money the poor man can draw to purchase clothing is from potatoes, either by their sale, or by their consumption enabling him to make shift with a grist once in two weeks instead of every week.

In a further letter of September 10, (20) written through the newspaper to the leading Whig, Lord John Russell, Osborne went one step further in his attempts to improve the workers' diet. He suggested that the potato had been an 'unwholesome diet' even before the blight, rending men unable to do their work and apathetic: they were fit only for the pigs.

This had also been the opinion of the journalist William Cobbett who in his *The English Gardener*, 1833 (21)) regarded the vegetable as no more than an accompaniment to meat 'and not to be used as a *substitute for bread'*. In the case of the Dorset labourers, however, the potato was preferable to bread made of grist, which was nutritionally inadequate and tasted like sawdust.

In 1847 the potato crop recovered to some extent, both on the mainland and in Ireland, but many of the labourers in both countries had already eaten all their seed potatoes and so had nothing to plant. A similar disaster, though caused by carelessness rather than desperation, occurs in Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles.*(22)

> It was now the season for planting and sowing; many gardens and allotments of the villagers had already received their spring tillage; but the garden and the allotment of the Durbeyfields were behindhand. [Tess] found, to her dismay, that this was owing to their having eaten all the seed potatoes, – that last lapse of the improvident.

Hardy's Durbeyfields were a feckless bunch, an accusation often levelled at the Irish cottiers. Sir Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury during the Famine, thought that they were lazy, and so, by implication, had brought their problems on themselves. Potato growing was not a full time job.(23)

> A fortnight for planting, a week or ten days for digging, and another fortnight for turf-cutting, suffice for his existence; and during the rest of the year he is at leisure to follow his own inclinations…

The open-minded Osborne went to see the country for himself, visiting Ireland twice towards the end of the 1840s. His book *Gleanings in the West Of Ireland* (24) was the outcome of his intensive investigation of eleven Union Houses in the region. This must have been a harrowing experience; the workhouses were grossly overcrowded and filled with the dead and dying, victims of the Famine. Osborne hoped that the cultivation of the potato would be given up 'as the great absorbing object of the tillers of the soil'. It was not just that it was subject to blight, there was also 'some latent germ of disease, in the genus, potato'.

In his definitive work *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, (25) Redcliffe Salaman described the history of potato-eating as a history of poverty. In Ireland 'by reducing the cost of living to the lowest possible limit, it caused the value of labour to fall to a corresponding level'. There was little hope of change. In Dorset too, Osborne observed, the owners of the land 'reaped enormous incomes, [and] were content to encourage the system, so long as it kept up their incomes'.

In his contribution to the Second Report of the Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture of 1868-9, Osborne wondered whether housing on great estates could be improved 'so long as estates can be tied up for generations, loaded with settlements, and so parchment-hampered that the proprietors are such far more in name than fact, society at the same time expecting them to live up to the standard of their supposed proprietorship, it is clear that estate improvement is out of the question'.(26)

The rigidity of the system – and a general lack of will – helped to maintain the status quo. Although the plight of the Dorsetshire labourer was now well-known, there was no movement towards either of the obvious alleviations: the raising of wages or the reduction of rents. Instead, many of the landowners and farmers encouraged emigration. In Ireland, where one million people, an eighth of the population, were to die of starvation or related diseases such as typhoid or dysentery, another million people emigrated, most of them to America, Canada or

England. The transatlantic travellers were transported in rickety unsafe 'coffin ships': one in fifty of the emigrants did not survive the journey.(27)

Osborne had been in two minds about emigration. In a letter of June 2 1848 he said that 'there was a time when I should have started from the idea of seeking to send the poor away from among us', but he had come to believe they could not be worse off abroad than they were at home.

Characteristically, he organised his own scheme, gathering together a group of local volunteer emigrants. He met them at Plymouth docks, to check that they were 'properly outfitted for the voyage'. With his usual attention to detail, he questioned the medical attendants on board and inspected the food supplies and the ventilation. For him, emigration was a solution to the problem, but not a happy one, as the emigrants were leaving behind their families and the woods and fields of home.

Life for the labourers improved somewhat in the early 1850s. The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 (a move supported by both Osborne and The Times) led to lower wheat prices, which in turn brought down the price of bread. By the mid-century Osborne felt that his campaigning had made Dorset landlords inescapably aware of the squalid living conditions of their workers and were 'now doing much to remedy them'. Progress was haltingly slow, but, as the editor of Osborne's letters has noted, by the time of the General Election in 1885:

> Speeches were then made over the length and breadth of England, and accepted by the public as true statements of proven facts, for which Lord Sidney Osborne thirty years before had been placed under a social ban, and had been threatened with being hauled to the bar of the House of Commons.

Osborne would not have been recognised as an authority without the support of The Times. He had used the only medium available to him – the printed word – to great effect in letters which were pertinent, often witty, and informed. Despite hostility, he continued to write to the newspaper until he retired in 1875. And for their part, without his letters The Times would have lost a major commentator on some important and often disregarded social problems of the mid-nineteenth century.

As for William Soper, (28) although there had been a good harvest in 1848 and the potatoes had come again, it was too late to save him. He and his family emigrated to Lostock, New South Wales in 1849, where he died on February 13 1862.

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