

Rural Social Relations, 1830–50: Opposition to Allotments for Labourers*

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Abstract

The allotment movement played an important part in rural class relations after 1830, but its history has been neglected. This article explores one aspect of that history, opposition to allotments between 1830 and 1850. Opposition to allotments amongst landowners seems to have been largely confined to those who felt an ideological commitment to political economy. These landowners feared, on what it is argued were mistaken grounds, that allotments would prove economically damaging, and in particular that they would increase population. Opposition amongst farmers was common, although by no means, as some historians have supposed, universal. Farmers opposed allotments for a variety of reasons, principally out of a desire to keep labourers in as dependent an economic position as possible and to maintain a sharp status distinction between themselves and labourers. Labourers, surprisingly, also often opposed allotments at least on their initial introduction. This opposition is best explained as an indication of the depth of suspicion existing between labourers and their social superiors at this time. The article concludes by arguing that the existence of opposition to allotments in this period does not afford grounds for doubting their social benefits, but that the divergence of opinion between farmers and landowners over allotments contributed to a serious deterioration in the relationship between the two classes in this period.

THE allotment movement was of major economic and political significance in rural England between 1830 and 1850. Numerous accounts testify to the crucial importance of allotments in helping labouring families make ends meet in many parts of rural England in this period, and the movement achieved considerable political prominence in 1830–4 and again in 1843–5. Historiographically, the subject of allotments has been neglected, only one article and no books having been published on the nineteenth-century movement. This situation requires remedy, and to that end the present article concentrates on one particular aspect of the history of allotments, namely opposition to allotment provision between 1830 and 1850. This is a subject which has important implications for our understanding both of the allotment movement and

of rural society in this period more generally. The three rural classes most directly affected by allotments were landowners, farmers, and labourers, and, after a brief outline of the development of the allotment movement in the first half of the nineteenth century, the remainder of this article assesses the extent and causes of opposition within each of these classes.¹

I

The allotment movement originated as a response to the food shortages experienced during the early years of the Napoleonic Wars. But although the movement initially attracted some prominent support, this was not sustained, and the number of plots grew only slowly until 1830. In this year, the 'Captain Swing' riots drew public attention to the condition of the agricultural labourer again, and the Labourer's

* This article is an emended version of a paper given to the British Agricultural History Society's 1995 Spring Conference. I have benefited from comments made on that occasion and by Dr E J T Collins and Dr J R Wordie of Reading University. Any remaining errors are of course my own.

¹ The article referred to is D C Barnett, 'Allotments and the problem of rural poverty, 1780–1840', in E L Jones and G E Mingay, eds, *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution: Essays Presented to J D Chambers*, 1967, pp 162–83.

Friend Society began an effective campaign to promote allotments as the most plausible remedy for the social problems of the countryside. The number of allotments began to rise quite rapidly, and by 1850 there may have been more than 100,000 plots in existence, concentrated in the Midlands, East Anglia, and some parts of southern England. The first legislative measure to promote allotments had been passed as early as 1819, when clauses in the Select Vestries Act permitted parishes to provide up to 20 acres of allotments. This was supplemented, and extended to 50 acres, by three acts passed in 1831 and 1832. However, none of the acts had a significant impact on the availability of allotments, because the farmers who dominated most parish vestries proved unwilling to make use of the legislation. A further period of active political interest in allotments in the early 1840s led to the setting up of a select committee, which recommended additional legislation. This recommendation appears to have influenced the General Inclosure Act of 1845, which included clauses requiring allotments to be set out in future enclosures under the act, unless the commissioners thought this inappropriate in a particular case. However, the 1845 Act proved almost as nugatory as previous legislative efforts: of 614,800 acres of land enclosed under the act between 1845 and 1869, only 2223 acres appear to have been set aside for allotments. In the period 1830–50, public provision of allotments was virtually negligible. The success of the Labourer's Friend Society and its adherents in persuading individual landowners to provide allotments was therefore the most important factor in the growth of the number of plots which occurred in this period.²

² *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, CXXXVII, 1842, p 107; BPP, 1868–9, X, SC on the Inclosure Act, p 329. The acts mentioned in the text are 59 Geo III c 12, 1 and 2 Will IV c 42, 1 and 2 Will IV c 59, 2 Will IV c 42, 8 and 9 Vict c 118, and 50 and 51 Vict c 48.

II

Opposition to allotments amongst landowners after 1830 seems to have been quite rare. Whilst many landowners showed only limited interest in allotment provision, and others thought that various restrictions and regulations were required to make the system work, it is difficult to find more than a handful who evinced outright hostility to the movement. All of the many select committees and royal commissions which remarked on allotments in this period were in favour, and the national and local press was nearly as unanimous. Indeed, opposition to allotments amongst landowners appears to have been largely confined to a small sub-group: those who were strongly under the influence of political economy.

Almost all the attacks attributable to landowners on allotments in this period are marked by the language and arguments of political economy. The leading political economists had written critically – indeed often scathingly – about allotments. McCulloch condemned them at length in the 1824 supplement to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and J S Mill subsequently attacked them as a means of making the poor produce their own poor rates. Writers of the so-called 'Christian Economist' school were also hostile to land provision for labourers. Malthus thought that if such a system was made general it would result in a subdivision of holdings, a decline in the customary standard of living, and a catastrophic increase in population. Chalmers argued that it was better to leave the distribution of land to natural economic forces, and declared that he did not wish to give any encouragement to 'either the potato system, or the cow system, or the cottage system, or the village system of Mr Owen, or any one system of miraculous achievement...'. Copleston was similarly hostile, stating that cottage farms 'notoriously' decreased national wealth. The hostility of these Christian Economist writers

is especially significant in that it has been argued, notably by Peter Mandler, that they had a formative influence on the mentality of many of the more active and articulate of the early nineteenth-century country gentry.³

There were of course some landowners who felt an ideological commitment to political economy but were not hostile to allotments. The third marquis of Lansdowne, to take one example, was both an enthusiast for political economy and one of the most extensive proprietors of allotments. Nevertheless, it remains broadly true that those landowners most influenced by political economy, whether liberal Tory or Whig liberal, were hostile to allotments.⁴

Political economists and their landowning followers objected to the provision of land for labourers on a number of grounds. In the first place there was a general sense that the plan was a retrogressive one. John Wilson, one of the assistant Poor Law commissioners, thought that the provision of land for labourers by the duke of Northumberland and the marquis of Waterford had 'too much of a family resemblance to other modes of disinterring feudal habits and feelings' such as the volunteer corps, and amounted to 'a luxury attainable by enormous wealth alone, and by disregard of economical considerations'. Linked to this idea that the provision of land for labourers was retrogressive was the feeling that it militated against the clarity of the functional division between labourers, farmers and landowners. 'A consideration hostile to allotments of this kind', as Wilson said, 'is that they seem to be

attempts to do the work of united labour and capital by means of individual and isolated efforts'. It was similarly argued that if labourers were given large plots of land they would merely become undercapitalized small farmers, which, as we shall see below, was a prospect which those influenced by political economy often looked upon with horror.⁵

But the most alarming spectre raised by the political economists was the claim that allotments would increase population. Two principal assumptions were generally involved: first, that if labourers had land, their better economic position would lead to earlier marriages and hence a rising birth rate; and second, that the offspring of these marriages would choose to remain on the land, resulting in ever greater subdivision of holdings in each successive generation and ultimately a 'cottier population'. The great fear was that the allotment movement would lead to the reproduction in rural England of the worst features of the Irish agrarian economy. It was widely believed at the time that the cause of Ireland's problems was excessive subdivision of land and the lack of a 'progressive' class of highly-capitalized tenant farmers. D O P Okeden, another of the 1834 assistant commissioners, illustrates this concern well:

But let us consider a still more enlarged allotment, one which will occupy the whole time of the man and his family to obtain support. The labourer then becomes a petty farmer, without capital, working land inadequately manured and half cultivated, and yielding, of course, insufficient crops as the return of fruitless exertions. Nor is this the only evil of these large allotments; a hovel perhaps is erected on the land, and marriage and children follow. In a few years more, the new generation will want land, and demand will follow demand, until a cottier population, similar to that of Ireland, is spread over the country, and misery and pauperism are everywhere increased.⁶

References to Ireland occur very frequently in discussions of the possible draw-

³ J R McCulloch, 'The cottage system', *Encyclopaedia Britannica Supplement*, III, Edinburgh, 1824; J S Mill, 'The claims of labour', *Edinburgh Review*, LXXXI, 1845, pp 521-5; Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, III, 5th edn, 1817, p 241; [Thomas Chalmers], 'The Report of the Select Committee on the Poor Laws', *Edinburgh Review*, XXIX, 1817/8, p 272; [E Copleston], *A Second Letter to Robert Peel, on the Causes of the Increase of Pauperism, and on the Poor Laws*, 1819, p 106; Peter Mandler, 'The making of the New Poor Law Redivivus', *Past and Present*, 117, 1987, p 156.

⁴ Earl Fortescue, 'Poor men's gardens', *The Nineteenth Century Magazine*, CXXXIII, 1888, pp 395-6; see also Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, 1988, p 38.

⁵ BPP, 1834, XXVIII, *RC on the State of the Poor Laws*, pp 27, 124-6.

⁶ BPP, 1834, XXVIII, p 27.

backs of providing labourers with land, but there were a number of counter arguments. Perhaps the most persuasive to modern ears was put succinctly by G T Scobell, one of the foremost advocates of allotments:

Many persons, I am quite aware, think it increases population. I think otherwise; the more comfortable you make a poor man, the more likely his children are to wait a little, rather than to rush into marriage without forethought.⁷

Historical experience seems to have proved Scobell correct; but many contemporaries took Okeden's view of the matter.

Ironically the hostility of political economists and their landowning followers to allotments rested in large part on a misunderstanding. Used to thinking in terms of abstractions and ultimate tendencies, the political economists addressed themselves to the question of whether the principle of subdividing the entire country, or at least a large part of it, into smallholdings, and turning every agricultural labourer into a peasant proprietor, was a viable solution to the problem of poverty. But almost none of those who argued for allotments wanted to see more than a fraction of the country divided into allotments, and they envisaged not smallholdings but plots of, in general, only a quarter or half an acre, which would supplement rather than replace the labourer's wages.

III

Historians often suggest that farmers were universally hostile to allotments. In fact the situation was more complicated than this, and many farmers were indeed in favour of allotments. A J Lewis, assistant commissioner for Shropshire, Herefordshire and Monmouthshire in 1832-4, found that:

The farmers with whom I conversed on this subject (and I believe it to be the general sentiment) seemed favourably inclined to its adoption, provided care

were taken that such allotments did not interfere with the labourers' ordinary employments.⁸

Some farmers went beyond this, and gave active support to the allotment movement. For example, William Sanxter, one of the agents of the Labourer's Friend Society, was a farmer. At East Peckham (Kent), all the subscribers to the local allotment society were farmers, and whilst this level of involvement was uncommon, it was not unusual for farmers to offer labourers occasional assistance with the cultivation of their allotments. Sir Henry Fletcher, speaking of Walton-on-Thames (Surrey), told the Select Committee on the Labouring Poor of 1843 that many of the local farmers had 'a very kind feeling' towards allotment holders, and that 'they are disposed to lend their teams [to the allotment holders] to plough'. Henry Martin of the West Kent Labourer's Friend Society informed the same select committee that in west Kent the farmers were 'very kind to the labourers in lending them their horse and cart, so as to get the manure to their ground of an evening; we find that the farmers generally render them assistance in that respect'. At Great Somerford (Wiltshire) the farmers sometimes carted manure for allotment holders and occasionally ploughed their land for them. Farmers at Hawkedon (Suffolk) also lent labourers horses and carts.⁹

There is in addition some reason to believe that farmers became less hostile to allotments with time and experience. One dramatic case was reported by the Revd B Lambert, who initially encountered much opposition from farmers in his Oxfordshire parish. However, after a year the farmers apparently came and begged him to continue the allotments, the future of which was evidently in doubt. Whilst such enthusiasm was atypical, there is enough evidence of softened attitudes to allotments amongst

⁸ BPP, 1834, XXVIII, p 669.

⁹ *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, CXXX, 1842, p 10; BPP, 1843, VII, pp 11, 14, 122; *The Labourer's Friend*, XXX, 1846, p 208.

⁷ BPP, 1843, VII, *SC on the Labouring Poor*, p 26.

farmers after they had been in existence locally for a number of years to suggest that this was a common pattern.¹⁰

We also need to remember that much of the hostility expressed by farmers to allotments was, as with the hostility of landowners influenced by political economy, relative to the size of the plots being offered. The strongest hostility was reserved for large allotments.

However, whilst not all farmers opposed all sorts of allotment, far more instances of farmers opposing than of farmers co-operating with allotment provision could be cited. How did farmers attempt to resist allotment provision, and why did they feel so strongly on this point?

Farmers were limited in the action that they could take to impede the allotment movement by the simple fact that they did not own the land and so did not ultimately control its use. But there was much they could do to make the progress of the allotment movement more difficult. James Orange, proselytizing for the allotment movement at Ashby Magna in Leicestershire in 1843, found that none of the farmers would lend him a barn to lecture in. Undeterred, he lectured to the labourers in the open air, to the great anger of the farmers. Orange's method of appealing directly to the labourers was unusual. In the south of England, allotments were generally initiated by the landowner or clergyman rather than through the labourers, and farmers could not attempt to throttle the idea at source in this way. However, they had considerable power at the next stage - finding land for the intended allotments. This was very often the stumbling block in attempts to provide allotments. The farmers were in a stronger position than might at first appear. If allotments were to be provided, someone had to give up the land. Even assuming that the principal landowners in a parish had land in their own occupation,

it was quite possible that none of it would be suitable for allotments. Such land might be too distant from the labourers' cottages, too poorly drained, emparked, or otherwise inappropriate. In such a case, if land was to be provided for allotments, one of the farmers would have to agree to give it up. Unless a convenient lease fell in, the farmers were the ones who held the strong hand in this situation. Few landowners were so determined to provide allotments that they would risk their reputation by attempting to coerce farmers into relinquishing land.¹¹

It seems that farmers often took advantage of the strength of their position by refusing to give up land for allotments. Lord Carnarvon was quoted in *Facts and Illustrations*, the precursor to the *Labourer's Friend Magazine*, as stating that in Hampshire there was 'great indisposition' on the part of the farmers to give up land. Similarly, Francis Pym told the 1830 House of Lords Select Committee on the Poor Laws that he knew of instances of proprietors having found difficulty in inducing farmers to give up any part of their land for allotments. Farmers were sometimes able to prevent the introduction of allotments into their parishes by this simple means even when local landed opinion was otherwise unitedly in favour. The *Labourer's Friend Magazine* reported in January 1841 that in a village in west Kent, a local farmer had succeeded in preventing the creation of an allotment site despite the fact that there was a long waiting list for allotments and that the rector, curate, and local gentry were sympathetic to the plan.¹²

If farmers were sometimes able to thwart private attempts to offer the labourers allotments, they were still better placed to block the creation of parish allotments under the acts of 1819, 1831 and 1832, since in most parishes, the farmers were in effective

¹¹ *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, CLIII, 1843, p 179.

¹² BPP, 1834, XXVIII, p 300; 1830-31, VIII, SC on the State of the Poor Laws, p 311; *Facts and Illustrations*, nd [c 1830], p 124; *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, CXVIII, 1841, p 9.

¹⁰ *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, CXVII, 1840, p 176.

control of the vestry. At Cranfield in Bedfordshire, for example, allotments were initially proposed in 1827. Agreement was secured from twenty-three of twenty-four farmers, but the single dissident was able to block the project for the next three years. Only the excitement of 1830 gave the rector, who was behind the proposal, the necessary leverage to carry through his plan.¹³

Even after allotments had been provided, the struggle was by no means over. There are frequent reports of farmers refusing to employ labourers who had allotments. At Byfield in Northamptonshire, farmers apparently often refused to employ labourers with allotments, seriously diminishing the anticipated benefits of the scheme.¹⁴ The 1834 Poor Law Report provides further examples. Assistant Commissioner Pringle reported that: 'at Lymington I learned from some labourers, that their accepting the allotments offered would have led to their being discharged by their employers'.¹⁵ John Wilson found a similar unwillingness amongst farmers in Northumberland to employ labourers with allotments (although in this case the allotments were large, which may have made the farmers unusually hostile).¹⁶ At Blockley in Gloucestershire, the *Worcester Chronicle* reported in 1843 that the large farmers had refused to employ any labourer who had more than two chains of land.¹⁷

Less drastic methods of discouraging labourers from taking allotments were also practised. As we have seen, farmers sometimes loaned horses and farming equipment to allotment holders. But more often they withheld them, or charged exorbitantly for their use. The problem was especially likely to arise on large allotments, not only because farmers were more hostile to them anyway, but also because large

allotments needed ploughing. Farmers in Northumberland, for example, were unwilling to loan labourers their horses for this purpose.¹⁸ But even on ordinarily sized allotments labourers might well need to use horses for certain operations, particularly carting manure. Richard Pollen, a Wiltshire landowner, explained the problems this could cause for allotment holders to the 1830 House of Lords Select Committee on the Poor Laws:

One of the great difficulties I have found is in the carting of manure for those people; the manure which is produced by their pig is all they have: the farmers are very much prejudiced upon that subject, and as they must be the persons to lend the team in the winter, they charge them very high for it. I think, for instance, in my tithing they charge in a very short winter's day for a cart and two horses at the rate of twelve shillings a day, which is enormous; and I have had serious thoughts of setting up a cart and horse for those poor people and let it be employed at any other time, in any other way, and receive for a cart and one horse three shillings or three shillings and six pence a day.¹⁹

There is some evidence to suggest that large farmers were particularly hostile to allotments. We have already seen that at Blockley in Gloucestershire it was the large farmers who said they would not employ labourers with more than two chains of land. Similarly at Horsebridge (Sussex) it was the large farmers who opposed William Sanxter's attempts to introduce allotments. This supports the Hammonds' assertion to the same effect, and would also be in line with the findings of Barry Reay that in Hernhill and Dunkirk (Kent) the social divide was between the large farmers on the one hand, and the labourers and small farmers on the other. The Hammonds may also have been right in thinking that the relationship between small farming and allotment holding was a symbiotic one. Not only were the more intermittent labour requirements of small farming better adjusted to the allotment system, as the

¹³ *Facts and Illustrations*, p 114.

¹⁴ BPP, 1830-31, VIII, p 40.

¹⁵ BPP, 1834, XXVIII, p 298.

¹⁶ BPP 1834, XXVIII, p 126.

¹⁷ *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, CLIV, 1844, p 5.

¹⁸ BPP 1834, XXVIII, p 126.

¹⁹ BPP, 1830-31, VIII, p 51.

Hammonds suggested; there seems also to have been a complementary relationship between allotments and the small farmer's sometimes underutilized equipment – in particular horses, carts, and ploughs. According to W J Denison, for example, labourers on his north Yorkshire estate were offered 'the option of one, two, three, or perhaps four acres, and they get their ploughing performed by one of the small farmers, of whom we have some who rent forty or fifty acres, and keep a couple of horses'.²⁰

Resistance to the introduction of allotments seems to have been more bitter amongst East Anglian farmers than it usually was elsewhere. This is perhaps unsurprising bearing in mind the notoriously bad relations between farmers and labourers in the region, and the not unconnected prevalence of large farms. Contrastingly, there is some evidence to suggest that farmers in west Kent, where the local branch of the Labourer's Friend Society made particular efforts to reconcile farming opinion, were by the late 1840s less hostile to allotments than was the case in most other parts of the country. But although there may have been some regional differences in the degree to which farmers opposed allotments, these do not seem to have been apparent to contemporaries, who almost invariably assumed that farmers' opposition to allotments was a general and national, rather than a regional, phenomenon. This assumption is broadly borne out by the surviving evidence, which implies that for almost every county in which allotments were common in this period, there was much opposition to the allotment movement, offset by a small but persistent undercurrent of support. The next section of this article attempts to explain why oppo-

sition to allotments was so widespread and sometimes bitter amongst farmers.²¹

IV

The reason that farmers most often gave for their opposition to allotments was that allotments would weaken their bargaining position *vis-à-vis* the labourers. This fear was expressed in several different forms. Often, for example, farmers said they were afraid that allotments would interfere with the labourers' work.²² A particular aspect of this concern was the expectation that at the time when the farmer most needed the labourer, the labourer would be unwilling to work for him, because he would want to harvest his own crop.²³ When John Mallows wrote a letter on behalf of the labourers of Bozeat (Northamptonshire) asking for allotments to be provided in their village, it was this anxiety that he primarily addressed himself to:

Some gentlemen think that if a poor man has land enough to maintain him he will be careless about working for him at a time of need, but I can prove to the contrary – it is not likely that any industrious man will be against cutting down that which he subsists on...²⁴

Another way in which farmers expressed what was essentially the same concern was to assert that labourers would become too 'independent' if they had allotments.²⁵ A statement made by Richard Pollen to the 1830 House of Lords Select Committee on the Poor Laws gives an indication of what farmers meant by this:

²¹ For the bitterness of opposition to allotments in East Anglia, see for example: *Facts and Illustrations*, pp 194, 226; BPP, 1834, XXXVII, *RC on the State of the Poor Laws*, pp 372-3; 1843, VII, p 39; 1843, XII, *Report on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, p 269; *Bury and Suffolk Herald*, 22 Jan 1845; *The Labourer's Friend*, XXXIV, 1847, pp 40-43, and XCVI, 1852, pp 66-73. For the efforts of the West Kent Labourer's Friend Society to reconcile farmers to the allotment system, and evidence of its success in doing so, see *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, CXXX, 1842, p 9, CLIII, 1843, p 186, and CLIV, 1844, p 6.

²² BPP, 1843, VII, pp 2, 133, and XII, p 265; *The Labourer's Friend*, VI, 1844, p 115; *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, CII, 1839, p 123.

²³ BPP, 1843, XII, p 265; 1834, XXVIII, p 126.

²⁴ *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, LIX, 1836, p 36.

²⁵ BPP, 1843, VII, pp 2, 39; 1834, XXVIII, pp 170-1.

²⁰ *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, CLIV, 1844, p 5; *Facts and Illustrations*, p 422; J L and B Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, 4th edn, 1927, p 136; B Reay, *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers*, 1990, pp 31-4; J L and B Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, p 136; BPP, 1833, V, *SC on Agriculture*, p 525.

...I think if a pauper has sufficient land or a cow, for instance, to make him above receiving the common wages of farmers, and not willing to be employed by them as a weekly labourer, that directly sets the farmers very much against the system, they being, I need hardly say, sufficiently prejudiced against it already.²⁶

The second major reason farmers gave for their hostility to allotments was that labourers who had allotments would not be such good workers. They would exhaust all their strength on their plots, and then be unable to 'do justice' to their employer.²⁷ D O P Okeden expressed the farmer's point of view well:

The allotment of larger portions of land than ten rods to an individual has this evil: if the labourer cultivates it himself with only the aid of his family, he overforces his strength, and brings to his employer's labour a body exhausted by his struggle.²⁸

Farmers also claimed that allotments encouraged labourers to steal from them.²⁹ A Mr Richardson, of Heydon, Norfolk, explained the farmers' fears on this count to S J Denison in 1843:

Generally speaking, farmers don't like it. They think it interferes with the labour they are entitled to; and many of them [ie the allotment holders] get pigs; and as the men have access to the corn, turnips etc on the farm, it is often supposed the temptation to help their own pigs may be too strong for some of them.³⁰

In addition to the objections described above, which farmers acknowledged openly, they had other concerns which, because they were less likely to command sympathy, were not in general voiced. One of these was the fear of economic competition from labourers. Ashurst Majendie explained that:

In the mind of many occupiers there exists considerable prejudice on this subject; they are afraid of making labourers independent; and some look with

an evil eye to a supposed diminution of their profits by introducing a new class of producers.³¹

The competition in this respect can, however, hardly have been severe. Labourers only rarely sold even a part of the produce of their allotments. It is true that the food a labourer and his family grew on their allotment and then consumed themselves was food which might otherwise have been bought in the market and thus ultimately from the farmer. But the agricultural labourer was by the mid-nineteenth century only a small part of the farmer's total market. So whilst we should allow for a certain degree of anxiety on this front, it seems unlikely that fear of competition from labourers' allotments was a very significant cause of hostility to allotments amongst farmers.

Another concern that some farmers seem to have felt was the fear of losing land. It is easy to understand that even had farmers been generally well-disposed towards the allotment system they would rarely have been willing to give up land for the purpose. However, as remarked above landowners were unlikely to take the drastic step of forcing farmers to give up land, and it was not until 1887 that legislation permitting compulsory purchase by public authorities was passed.³²

One interesting dimension to the hostility of farmers to allotments is the question of the extent to which they were already involved in letting land to labourers in the form of potato grounds. Potato grounds were small plots of a farmer's fallow temporarily let out to labourers. The labourer would cultivate potatoes on one of these plots for a season, after which it would revert to the farmer. Potato grounds were often let at extraordinarily high rents – typically £8 an acre. Land let at rents like these was admittedly manured and ploughed by the farmer. But even if we ignore the high rent, the

²⁶ BPP, 1830–31, VIII, p 51.

²⁷ BPP, 1843, XII, pp 265, 294; 1834, XXVIII, p 481; *Facts and Illustrations*, p 124.

²⁸ BPP, 1834, XXVIII, p 27.

²⁹ BPP, 1843, VII, pp 2, 133, and XII, p 88.

³⁰ BPP, 1843, XII, p 269.

³¹ BPP, 1834, XXVIII, pp 170–1.

³² *Bury and Suffolk Herald*, 22 Jan 1845; BPP, 1834, XXVIII, pp 124–6.

labourer in general gained much less from the arrangement than the farmer did. Potatoes made a good preparation for corn, and the farmer would also have the benefit of the labourer keeping the land clean and of any additional manure the labourer might collect for his plot. Potato grounds had existed in many parts of England since the food shortages of the Napoleonic Wars, and it is clear that in some parts of the country – Dorset, for example – they were very common. It is unsurprising that farmers involved in letting them resented the intrusion of the allotment movement. Allotments were not only let at much lower rents than potato grounds – typically less than £2 an acre – but also gave labourers more independence and the full value of their inputs. There is indeed evidence to suggest that allotments drove out potato grounds. Certainly what had been a common arrangement in the early nineteenth century became progressively less common as the century wore on. The landowners and clergymen who were behind the allotment movement were at best indifferent to the effect of their plan on the farmers' potato grounds, and quite often rejoiced to see what they saw as an exploitative arrangement brought to an end. In a revealing statement, Sir William Miles MP told the 1843 Select Committee on the Labouring Poor that:

... I have found a difficulty with farmers, but I have found that gradually wear off; the difficulty with the farmers arose with those farmers who were in the habit of letting their land for eight pounds an acre for potato land, and these allotments knocked that on the head; I inquired whether the tenants of the allotments rented any land of the farmers, and their answer was, 'Oh, no sir, we get it so much better, and all our labour and manure goes to our own benefit'.³³

Miles's statement throws a somewhat ironic light on another contemporary comment on potato grounds, made by John Kirkham of Anderby in Lincolnshire. According to Kirkham:

The farmers in this parish cultivate a portion of potato ground for each labourer, according to his family; he has only to set, and take up the produce. The farmers find this works much better than the allotment system.³⁴

There is no doubt that the potato grounds issue, and equally the other fears expressed by farmers discussed above, were important sources of hostility to the allotment movement. But having taken all these factors into account, there is still something about the hostility of farmers towards allotments that seems to remain unaccounted for – its bitter edge. To understand this bitterness we need to look deeper than the simple economic aspects of the farmers' relationship to the labourers beneath them and the landowners above them. Farmers were a group whose status in the second quarter of the nineteenth century was far from secure. The gains they had made during the Napoleonic Wars, when they had thrust the farm servants out of their farmhouses and adopted a more middle class way of life, were under threat from the low prices of the agricultural depression that lasted well into the 1830s. Farmers were largely left behind by the growth of a free-trading mentality, entrenching themselves ever deeper in their protectionist fortress. After 1830 attacks on the Corn Laws by northern industrialists, and later the Anti-Corn Law League, intensified. Just at this moment the farmers found that their traditional leaders, the gentry and aristocracy, seemed to be deserting them. Whilst farmers responded largely to the economic pressures of the first half of the nineteenth century and hence pulled towards a traditional, protectionist, ruralist solution, the gentry and aristocracy, better insulated from these economic pressures, were by and large more responsive to the political pressures which eventually led, through Peel, to free-trading liberalism. In this context of status insecurity it seems to

³³ BPP, 1843, VII, p 108.

³⁴ BPP, 1834, XXXI, RC on the State of the Poor Laws, p 289.

have become particularly important to farmers to draw the line sharply between themselves and the labourers. What farmers seem to have resented most of all about allotments is that they blurred the distinction. We need to remember that allotments were larger then than now, occasionally ranging up to an acre or even more; that social status in the countryside was to a considerable extent defined by one's relationship to the land; and that the early nineteenth-century agricultural labourer occupied the lowest social rung of any non-criminal occupational group.

This anxiety over status finds expression again and again in jibes directed by farmers at labourers for trying to ape their superiors. Labourers who had allotments were called mocking names such as 'johnny farmer'. There was particular hostility to the attempts of some labourers to grow wheat on their plots. Wheat had a symbolic significance for farmers, and a hostility out of all proportion to the insignificant quantity produced on allotments was directed at labourers who tried to grow it. Whilst this hostility may partly have been motivated by the suspicion that labourers who grew wheat would be tempted to steal from their employers, contemporaries more plausibly attributed it to what they termed 'jealousy' on the part of farmers. The intensity of farmers' feelings on this particular point was sufficient to persuade landowners to incorporate clauses forbidding the cultivation of corn into many allotment tenancy agreements.³⁵

The bitterness of the farmers' hostility to allotments, and their efforts to thwart the spread of the system, led to a deterioration of their relations with landowners, who tended to see the farmers' attitude as being motivated by blind prejudice, greed, and a politically short-sighted wish to keep the labourer in as abject a state as possible. At Blockley, Gloucestershire, for example,

relations between the leading farmers and the proprietor, Lord Northwick, seem to have broken down completely over allotments in 1843. Northwick's reaction to the refusal of the leading farmers to employ any labourer who held more than two chains of land was to offer the labourers even more land.³⁶

The rise of the allotment movement was a significant chapter in the deteriorating relationship between farmers and landowners in mid-century, and future studies of rural social relations should give this episode its place alongside the better-known strains created by the repeal of the Corn Laws.

V

The last group whom we should consider as potential opponents to the allotment movement is, paradoxically, the labourers themselves. A letter to the *Morning Chronicle*, written by Alexander Somerville, argued that allotments had caused 'discontent, starvation, despair, and crime' because they were, according to the writer, only offered to those who were already considered to be of deserving character. This was not in fact true: allotments were frequently offered to all applicants precisely in order to 'reclaim' bad characters. However, Somerville's letter is an interesting echo of the suggestion made by John Archer to the effect that after 1830 a gap may have opened up between the increasingly 'respectable' married labourers, and the 'undeserving', rebellious single young men. In villages where allotments were reserved for the 'deserving' it would not be surprising to find some hostility to the movement amongst the excluded portion of the community.³⁷

The second respect in which we can speak of hostility to the allotment move-

³⁵ BPP, 1834, XXVIII, pp 124-6.

³⁶ *The Labourer's Friend Magazine*, CLIV, 1844, p 5.

³⁷ *Morning Chronicle*, 17 June 1844; J E Archer, *By a Flash and a Scare*, 1990, pp 61-6.

ment from labourers relates to their initial reception of the idea. In a surprising number of cases, the labourers' initial reaction to the offer of allotments was lukewarm at best, and often it was downright suspicious. Interestingly, after the allotments had been established for a while — usually no more than a year — the labourers of the village concerned, and often of surrounding villages too, seem frequently to have developed a strong desire not only to hold on to those plots they already had, but to be provided with more in addition. This phenomenon can perhaps best be understood as an indication of the degree of mistrust between labourers and their social superiors in the early nineteenth century. Anything proposed by the landowners or farmers was deeply suspect.

It would not be accurate to portray the agricultural labourers in this period as being in the main hostile to allotments. But we can recognize that there were elements of hostility present.

VI

Most historians who have discussed the allotment movement in their writings seem to have assumed that landowners were fairly evenly divided in their attitudes to allotments, and that farmers were almost always hostile. It also seems to have been supposed that opposition to allotments was motivated by practical experience of the drawbacks of the system. These assumptions have led many historians to adopt very cautious estimates of the economic value and social significance of allotments. In this article a different view of the opposition to allotments has been argued. Far from being evenly divided on the merits of allotments, landowners were almost all in agreement that allotments were beneficial. Opposition to allotments amongst landowners seems to have been almost confined to a relatively small if often highly articulate sub-group, those landowners

who were literate in, and dogmatically wedded to, political economy. The opposition of those influenced by political economy to allotments was based on theory and rested on a misunderstanding of the nature of the allotment movement, and should not mislead us into underestimating the benefits brought by allotments. Similarly, not all farmers opposed allotments: the leaders of farming opinion in fact were almost all in favour of allotments. Farmers' opposition to allotments appears to have been based mainly on anxieties over status and on a desire to keep labourers in as weak an economic position as possible; there is little to suggest that farmers, and still less farming, were seriously affected by the introduction of allotments.

Examination of the opposition to allotments also suggests conclusions about rural social relations more generally. It appears that the allotment movement was a significant source of tension between landowners and farmers. This tension resulted not merely from the difference of opinion over allotments, but from the motives perceived to have generated this difference. Landowners often became impatient with what they saw as a narrow and ungenerous if not downright bigoted opposition to allotments on the part of farmers. Farmers in their turn often reacted sourly and grudgingly to the attempts of landowners to extend allotment provision. The fact that the allotments issue provoked, not merely a difference of opinion, but suspicion, mutual incomprehension, and even, as we have seen, aggressive action on the one hand to thwart and on the other to promote allotments, suggests that a considerable gulf in outlook and values was opening up between landowners and farmers in this period. Allotments and the opposition to allotments may have been one of the prime causes, and were certainly a striking symptom, of deteriorating relations between landowners and farmers in the 1830s and 1840s.