

An Answer to Poverty in Sussex

1830-45

By A. C. TODD

THOUGH the founding of the Royal Agricultural Society in 1838 arose out of the acute and prolonged depression in farming, it might have occurred some years earlier on the disappearance in 1822 of the old Board of Agriculture. Faced with a refusal by the government of Lord Liverpool to provide any further funds for its maintenance, the President, Davies Gilbert, suggested that a new lease of life might be gained if the Board became a voluntary society, and membership was opened to the public through the payment of subscriptions and donations. The project failed, and the Board was dissolved, but the idea was not abandoned, and finally flowered as one of the many and varied efforts to break the deadlock of poverty and unemployment in agriculture.

The heavy burden of the poor rate, diminishing rents, uncultivated land, idle labour, and empty stomachs, leading to the violent and wanton destruction of property, were the outward symptoms of a *malaise* for which no one seemed to know the cure. William Gausden, coachman to Lord Charles Fitzroy, giving evidence about the reasons for rick-burning in Sussex in 1830, wrote down: "my Beliefe is this that the fiers were not spite to eny indiviead but to open the eyes of the NO Bileity in reagard of lost of the land for the want of imploy of the Labor in tilling it." The nobility were not blind to the blight which had settled on English agriculture, nor unaware of the real hardships of hunger and poverty, and the humiliations of poor law relief. Some of them, for instance, sensibly reacted to the suggestions advanced in 1801 and 1819 that one way of relieving distress among landless labourers would be to provide them with allotments. Imaginative landowners were prepared to experiment locally and on a limited scale on these lines. One of them was Mary Ann Gilbert of East-

bourne, the wife of Davies Gilbert, last President of the Board of Agriculture. Her private papers, kindly loaned by Major and Mrs Davies Gilbert of Herstmonceux, reveal the extent to which a private landowner was prepared to go to restore to the landless and workless labourer something of the independence which he had once enjoyed. Her work is an interesting pioneer effort to cope with the twin problems of poverty and unemployment by means of allotments.

Regarding compulsory relief as a degrading substitute for the spirit of "independent support," she had few illusions about the problem of poverty. On the one hand, the law of God and Nature said: "He that will not work, neither shall he eat"; on the other hand, the law of England said: "The industrious must maintain the families at the least of the most profligate and worthless." Parish relief she did not believe was any solution to this paradox. "I would rather see the Poor Rate sunk in the sea than employed as now to the misery and moral deterioration of my fellow creatures," she roundly declared. Like many other landowners of her time who saw good land going out of cultivation while labourers were required to be supported by an ever-increasing poor rate, she saw the answer to the problem of poverty in economic and moral terms, of land being made to produce its fruits, and of men being allowed to do honest work. She herself was prepared to demonstrate on her own land near Eastbourne that if the unemployed were provided with ground on which to grow their own food, the worst features of pauperism would disappear.

To break down a fixed conviction that the pauper was work-shy, she began a pilot scheme to cultivate waste land to the east of Beachy Head, which she calls "the beach." Dr Whately, Archbishop of Dublin, told her how he had tried to develop land in Ireland

as barren as a beach by transferring to it soil from meadowland. Describing his method to her he said: "I pared off the turf from part of a rich meadow, dug up a spit deep of the mould and laid it in a heap, then dug out the subsoil for about four feet more, which I carried to a barren hill, bringing from thence back carriage, the sand from the hill (as you would the shingle), with which I filled up the hole, then laid the top soil over, and replaced the turf. The meadow was of course rather better for the draining and the hill greatly enriched." Mrs Gilbert believed she could do the same by the double process of removing soil and clay from marshland, depositing them on "the beach" to the east of Beachy Head, and replacing them by flint pebbles taken from "the beach." If paupers were employed to do this work at fixed rates of pay, several objectives would be reached at the same time. Marshland would be drained, new land brought under cultivation, the Poor Rate of Eastbourne reduced, and proof found that paupers wanted to work.

By the beginning of November 1832 Mrs Gilbert was in a position to present to Whately an interim report on the progress of her scheme. Marshland had been purchased and part of "the beach" covered with its clay to a depth of three inches by twenty-seven paupers, who had worked at the rate of one rod per day. In spite of the dry summer of 1832, these paupers had produced a reasonable crop of potatoes, and seeing the possibilities of the scheme they were now anxious to hire at 3d. a rod or 40s. an acre as much of the beach as the parish were willing to fence off to keep away stray cattle, "who much relish the produce." In anticipation of this, a wall was built parallel to the coast road, and a gateway made fitted with the first iron gates seen in Sussex. As the labourer opened the gate his eye caught the warning: "Here waste not Time and you'll want not Food." It was claimed that 174 paupers, mostly married, were managing to support their families on this land, indignant that some of the local landowners seemed to prefer that they should receive 2d. a day as dole, while good land

"in fine corn country" was going out of cultivation. Of these 174, 117 had punctually paid their second year's rent for twelve rods each and no one had forfeited his land for trespass. One man Mrs Gilbert had provided with a cart and horse, the cost of which he had paid off through the sale of his produce. Because of his good husbandry he had now been permitted to rent a further three acres on condition that he also maintained a brother. One old man of sixty-seven had done so well with crops of potatoes, turnips, and mangel-wurzel that he had quadrupled the quarter of an acre he had originally rented and was now building "shelters" for himself, his cow, and his pigs. But in spite of these results, the vestries were sceptical and uncooperative, maintaining that the physical gain would be offset by a moral loss, for the labourers would actually learn to become independent.

Whately suggested that more trials should be made and then the results submitted to the Poor Law Commissioners as a possible local solution to pauperism. Before this could be done, some definite answers would have to be found to questions which the Commissioners would be sure to ask. For instance, did the day's labour of one man per rod mean spreading the soil over "the beach," or did it include the digging of that soil from the marsh and filling up the hole again? How many average men and boys could, in a week, prepare an acre of untouched "beach" and bring it into a state fit for planting? Had seaweed been tried as manure, as in Cornwall? Could it be brought in boats from Beachy Head? Could *beta maritima* be grown as cattle food? What was the best kind of hedge? Whately recommended sea buckthorn, or better still furze ditches made by digging two ditches with a mound between, on which was planted the furze, reinforced with tamarisk, as in Cornwall.

Mrs Gilbert reckoned that the cost of bringing one acre of beach into a state fit for cultivation was £16, but an Assistant Poor Law Commissioner who inspected the site put it at not less than £130. An independent assessor, one Pitman, reckoned it at £30, but

Whately advised her to proceed even if it cost £50, because it would be "a profitable speculation if the land be let at £2 since that would be 4 per cent on the outlay which is more than one can get in the Funds."

Whately was anxious that she should begin a long-term experiment, not with a view to the immediate benefit of neighbouring labourers, but by taking labourers from anywhere, to ascertain how much work a man could do per day. But this did not appeal to her. What she felt was needed was immediate relief to the labourer and a reduction of the poor rate. Through persistent pressure on the Eastbourne vestry, by bringing before them her own evidence and that of Whately's brother, the vicar of Cookham in Berkshire, who claimed that he had saved £15,000 in poor rates in eight years by setting paupers to cultivate "gravelled" soil, she succeeded in making them accept her views. They agreed that more "beach" land should be developed with pauper labour, each pauper to be paid by the parish for actual work done, and to be allowed to keep his crops after he had repaid the parish for the clay and soil.

Lord Liverpool, to whom she sent some specimen potatoes grown "on the beach," generally approved of the plan, though he admitted that he had a poor opinion of the Sussex labourer who drew on the poor rate "by habit" more heavily than the labourers in any other part of the country. This Mrs Gilbert strongly denied; she told him that when she had asked labourers whether they wished to emigrate they had invariably replied: "There is America in England." "There is," she said, "far more intelligence amongst labourers than those suppose who have not questioned them, they eagerly read the papers in hopes of the promised amendment of the Poor Laws, and say they believe the Government has forgotten them." In a public letter of November 1833 to the overseers of the parish of Eastbourne, she pointed out how in 1832 between four and five thousand pounds had been spent on the relief of those "not infirm" who were indignant at being kept useless on the roads in sight of

land going out of cultivation, while they watched foreign corn being imported from Newhaven by land carriage to Lewes "with heavy tolls."

It is not surprising therefore that Mrs Gilbert early became a member of the Labourers' Friend Society, for its aims coincided with her own. Having proved that labourers would work even on land which they had to reclaim themselves, she was convinced that the amelioration of their condition was bound up with allotting them land at a fair rent which they could cultivate by spade husbandry. The allotment system and educating the labourer in good husbandry were the key to restoring independence to the peasantry of Sussex, especially if supported by sound moral teaching. When she let land to be turned into allotments, each tenant received a printed card bearing these words of pointed advice:

"Two glasses of gin every day at three half pence a glass cost four pounds eleven shillings and threepence a year, which would pay for:

	s.	d.
A Man's shirt	6	0
A pair of men's stockings	1	9
A pair of women's stockings	1	6
Shift and Muslin Cap	3	8
Printed Cotton Gown	5	6
A man's Cotton Shirt	4	0
A man's fustian Coat	16	0
A pair of Blankets	12	0
A neck Handkerchief	1	4
A pair of men's shoes	8	6
A pair of women's shoes	4	0
A Flannel Petticoat	2	6
A Coarse Cloth Cloak	7	0
A quilted waistcoat	4	0
Fustian Trousers lined	7	6
A pair of Cotton Sheets	6	0."

Edwin Chadwick thought this excellent, but wondered if much could be done in a locality by a group of individuals without the support of the Government. In a letter of 9 December 1833 to Mrs Gilbert he urged that "the landowners should unite with the labourers and get up petitions praying the parliament to put an end to all local discretion and abuse and appoint a special agency for dispauperising the country." Research of the kind that Mrs Gilbert was doing was necessary if the New Poor Law Bill of 1833 was to provide this special agency which Chadwick

had in mind. Its provisions she found profoundly disappointing—nothing about bringing more land under the plough, growing more wheat, making bread cheaper, encouraging more investment in land, solving the problem of the unemployed. "We make bread dear by paying a double set of labourers," she said, "our own for standing still against their wills, and foreigners for growing the food we buy." This she believed was the core of the trouble, and not, as the Lord Chancellor stated, that "able-bodied men prefer a small sum in idleness to a large sum in wages." Using all her powers of persuasion she called upon men of influence in Sussex to devise some method of determining whether a labourer would work or not before he and his family were forced into the workhouse. Nothing is more remarkable than the courage and persistency with which this woman advocated measures to see that the labourer had a fair deal, and she did not lack support. On 10 April 1835 the Guardians of the Poor of fourteen parishes from Seaford to Pevensey, on the invitation of the Poor Law Commission, met at Eastbourne, and not only protested against the forced separation of man and wife, but issued the following statement. "Nine paupers, for ten weeks up to January last, on the bleak downs near Beachy Head, drew in their Hand Carts and for £6 an acre, the same quantity of Chalk for which Surveyors allow a quarter part more, that is £8 for this labour when performed by cattle, for which hard work the poor fellows expressed themselves thankful, stating that they liked it far better than being on the roads useless."

In spite of the new Poor Law, she proceeded to develop her allotment system and to think out methods of improving the whole business of husbandry. She advocated supplying workmen's cottages with tanks to catch rain-water, and experimented on her own farms to show that a tank 12 ft by 7 ft was sufficient for a large family and six horses. One tank 23 ft by 11 ft was built for the Eastbourne Union and was more than sufficient for all the uses of its 150 inmates. The tanks she had in mind were of two kinds, the

more familiar barrel-shaped butt resting on the ground and covered, and a more elaborate kind which was dug out of the ground. One built by the Eastbourne Vestry was 20 feet deep, 10 ft in diameter, cased with a flint wall 9 inches thick, the whole covered in with grey lime mortar and domed over by brickwork "in the Egyptian manner." It was claimed that soft water, thus stored, was good enough for drinking, and especially if the water was filtered by placing inside the tanks a board covered with pebbles, sand, or powdered charcoal.

From Cornwall, through a Mr William Gill of Chacewater, she collected evidence to show that broadcasting wheat was wasteful, and that dibbling it produced a higher yield, as well as being more economical. Gill achieved this by placing three grains of wheat into a hole measuring 4 inches in depth and 7 inches across. But as she was not satisfied that dibbling was more satisfactory than drilling, she gave £10 to the Labourers' Friend Society to ascertain "the comparative produce and cost of broadcasting, dibbling, and drilling of wheat." She investigated the best method of stacking wheat in the open to protect it from rain and advocated the Cornish "Arish Mow." In Cornwall, which she often visited with her Cornish husband, she had noticed the practice of threshing the grain and storing it on the floor above the cattle shed, where it remained free from damp and vermin, a method also practised in Switzerland. To her labourers in Sussex she therefore passed on the advice of stacking the wheat like haystacks on stone piles, rather than in barns. She was tireless in circulating information about the advantages of forking the soil, of the stall-feeding of cows, and of the value of conserving liquid manure. Whenever she let land, the terms always included the improvements which she was trying to introduce. A tenancy could be forfeited if it was proved that any hay, straw, and manure had been left to waste on the roadside. The printed terms of a lease always included the advice, "It is recommended to fork the land as soon as convenient after Michaelmas, laying it up

in ridges for the benefit of sun and frost." Competition was also encouraged, as the following notice shows. "One penny, three half pence, and twopence per ear will be given in 1843 by Mrs Gilbert for the greatest number of ears of wheat from one grain, the plant being produced complete at the next Battel Horticultural Show."

The success of the allotment scheme may be gathered from the fact that while in 1830 Mrs Gilbert had some fifty allotment tenants, this number in 1835 had increased to 213, all of whom (with the exception of two), it was claimed, had, through their products, paid their rents. A reason advanced for this success was that she gave to each tenant a card, on one side of which were printed hints about the use of manure and how to make a compost heap, while on the other side were printed injunctions about Thrift and the value of Ready Money. The latter are worth reprinting.

"It makes all the difference to comforts and character whether a man takes up all his things at the shop as he wants them and then pays for them on the Saturday night, or whether he carries the money in his hand when he takes up the goods. In one case, he will always have the feeling of being in easy circumstances; in the other, he feels that he is a poor man; yet in both cases he has the same income and spends the same, except that when he has the ready money he can go to what shop he pleases and so makes his money go much further; and the shopkeeper too, is much more glad to see him and thinks better of him. And all this difference is made by just contriving to have one week's pay forward instead of backward; to live, not one week under another, but one week over another."

The *Sussex Advertiser* of 9 April 1844 described this allotment system as one of successful "home colonization," implying perhaps that if it were generally adopted it would do much to reduce the desire for overseas emigration. One observer, Mr J. I. Burns of the Labourers' Friend Society, wrote to the secretary describing a visit he had made to an allotment tenant at Javington. Here he had

found the man and his family, together with an aged mother, living in a cottage to which was attached a small shed for the stall-feeding of cows, and adjoining that a tank for the drainage of liquid manure. He worked three acres of land, two and a half of which were arable. The best crop at the time of inspection was the mangel-wurzel because it was fertilized by the liquid manure. It would seem that Mrs Gilbert had insisted that the tenant should experiment with the stall-feeding of cows, in return for which she had advanced him £5 to buy a cow. This he had repaid at the rate of 1s. 6d. per week, and was convinced that as a result of his trials cows gave more butter when stall-fed than in the open air "as 7 lb. to 5 lb." An examination of the tenant's accounts showed a flourishing state of affairs.

From 16 January to 26 July 1840,		
278 lb. of butter made, sold at 1s.		
a pound	£	13 18 0
2 calves sold for		5 18 0
Milk for the year, sold and given to the pigs		10 0 0
Probable produce of 88 rods of wheat at 8s. a bushel, say 19 bushels		7 12 0
Ditto of 40 rods of oats, at 4s. a bushel, say 14 bushels		2 16 0
Probable amount of butter for rest of year		6 8 0
		46 12 0
Deduct rent and rates	£	12 12 0
Deduct seeds		2 0 0
Deduct Hired Labour		2 0 0
		16 12 0
		£30 0 0

Burns's final comment to the secretary of the Society reveals no doubt in his mind about the success of the allotment scheme. "Contrast this with the probable result of the poor man's fortune if he had not thus been rescued from destitution . . . he gives to his country, by thus giving to his family, a considerable income; he saves to his country, by not becoming burdensome, another considerable increase."

Sydney Smith was almost equally enthusiastic. Writing to Mrs Gilbert in February 1841 he agreed that it was sound in principle to let the poor have small allotments of land.

But he was not quite sure about the stall-feeding of cows, still less about the general application of the principle of advancing money to buy cows. "I am not so sure about the cows, and as long as they live, it is very well, but who is to ensure this? And to replace the loss? In half an hour a poor wretch is hurled from the beatitude of his milky way upon the bare earth and if he has not the good fortune to live near Eastbourne he cannot get up again." Gently but firmly and in a tone of good-natured banter, he suggested that the stall-feeding of cows might be modified. "I have always considered the pasturing of cattle to be a perfect barbarism in agriculture—suppose Guillemard's¹ servants were to walk over their Bread and Butter and lay down upon it?" he questioned, and added that perhaps the cows ought to be let out for two or three hours a day in the open air, for "without this their health is apt to give way."

Seymour Tremenheere added his own testimony. "Re your mode of cultivation I have no doubt. There is a mine of wealth of moral and social good in the undeveloped resources of the land of England, the value of which it would be difficult to over-estimate. It is but beginning to be opened. Your example, however, must have greatly contributed to draw attention to it." (Letter to Mrs Gilbert, September 1842.) Tremenheere was speaking as one of the first inspectors of the Council of Education, and he had a special reason for writing to her, because he had been instructed by his Council to visit and inspect what was perhaps Mrs Gilbert's greatest achievement. This was the founding of two agricultural schools, one at Willingdon and the other at East Dean.

Tremenheere had been called upon to furnish a report on the industrial schools of the country, as provided for by the Poor Law Amendment Act, but these "self-supporting agricultural schools" of Mrs Gilbert's were part of the tradition of the older craft schools. The main idea was to teach the children of

allotment holders the rudiments of education, employing a master to do this who would otherwise have been in the workhouse, and paying him by the labour of the scholars. George Cruttenden, the first master of Willingdon School, has described how his school functioned. To his twenty scholars he taught reading, writing, accounts, the church catechism, the collects and psalmody, "on the National plan with the approval of the vicar." For this he received no salary, but took a fee of one penny per week from each scholar, and taught them from nine o'clock in the morning until midday. After a two-hour break, the children again assembled, and from two to five in the afternoon they were engaged in helping him to cultivate the land. Of this voluntary activity, Cruttenden recorded: "I have not lost one from dissatisfaction and I am glad to say that they willingly assist me." For the School House he paid an annual rent of £10, and £15 for the five acres of land which he farmed. This he claimed he easily paid through the sale of his produce, although he had no salary and had to maintain a wife and four children. The school institutionalized all the ideas which had become identified with Mrs Gilbert. The building had attached to it the usual shed for the stall-feeding of cows, the tank in the rear to draw off the liquid manure, the tanks to collect roof water, a pigsty, beehives, and storage above ground for grain. The same pattern was to be seen at the second school, opened in 1842 at East Dean, whose master, J. Harris, had once been a pauper with his wife and five children in Eastbourne Union. It was claimed that their keep in the Union at 3s. a head cost the rates £54 a year, "equal to the rent of 273 acres let as a sheep walk at Eastbourne at 4s. an acre—but he now maintains himself on five acres," said Mrs Gilbert. The link between labour and learning, which these schools fostered, was strengthened by moral and social values, which Burns was quick to point out in his report to the Labourers' Friend Society.

¹ John Guillemard was the brother-in-law of Mrs Gilbert's husband, Davies Gilbert, President of the Royal Society. He had been a member of the Land Commission set up to enquire into disputes after the American War of Independence.

"Now the education received here is such as is exactly needed for the probable destination of the children hereafter and calculated to improve their moral and physical condition in this world and to lay the basis of their eternal welfare hereafter; it cannot fail and there are thousands who may read this able to do the like, with the like probable and most important results."

Mrs Gilbert was less interested in the results of her work in a future life than in their immediate effects on the economic welfare of the labourer here and now. There is no doubt that her experiments attracted wide attention. She wrote a paper on "The Allotment System" which was read on 7 February 1844 to the Highland Agricultural Society at Edinburgh, with the Earl of Rosebery in the chair. A report on the Self-supporting Agricultural Schools was published in *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, 6 July 1844. Edward Sabine in October 1844 asked her for a paper embracing all her experiments and this Lord FitzWilliam presented to the Statistical Section of the British Association. On the evidence of Henry Coleman, her allotment system aroused wide interest in the United States of America, the Americans being astonished that "so much produce could be obtained by manual labour." Lord Erne in Ireland, and the earls of Essex and Devon were frequently asking her for information, while Viscountess Tamworth wanted to found similar schools at Shirley in Staffordshire.

When she died on the 26th April 1845, it was already generally realized that she was one of the pioneers who sought to abolish poverty by encouraging labourers to grow their own food on land let at economical rates. This is her greatest title to regard, that with vision and humanity she rescued the "forgotten men" from their position of dependence on the landowners, and through spade husbandry taught them self-respect. This was part of a wider plan to prove that land was capable of a much higher rate of productivity, a lesson not completely learnt until the submarine menace of the 1914-18 War. Her self-supporting agricultural schools were a vital part of this wider plan and re-introduced the old principle of a relationship between labour and learning, again not entirely appreciated until the days of the University Extension Movement. As the *Sussex Advertiser* remarked in its obituary notice, "In carrying out this plan, her object was a double one, for it was a part and a valuable part of her system to show that, as Cobbett said of the gallows, idleness and the workhouse was the worst use to which a man could be put. Mrs Gilbert by her industrial schools and by locating a family on a given small area of land also managed to prove the error of supporting the pauper population of this kingdom in idleness and of their continuing as mere consumers when they might be much better employed as producers of wealth."

Notes and Comments

THE BRITISH AGRICULTURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

A one-day conference was again held jointly with the Association of Agriculture at the University of London Institute of Education on the 10th of December 1955. Three papers were given all of which related to some scientific aspect of agricultural history. This marked a change from the previous two con-

ferences, which had been devoted to regional studies. The chair was taken by the President, Sir James Scott Watson, and about fifty people attended the conference, which was extremely successful.

The Annual General Meeting and Conference will be held this year at Florence Nightingale Hall, University of Nottingham,

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